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Architectural Ornamentation of Shigar Fort Complex Skardu Baltistan: Heritage of Pakistan

Abstract

The present research is about architectural decoration of Shigar Fort Complex; it presents traditional 17th century and 20th century architectural style and decorative elements. The complex is based on five buildings adjacent to each other with different roof levels, built in different time periods. Raja Mosque on south-east entrance and Raja Fort Palace on north side with Cherry and Amacha gardens, both unique monuments were originally built in 17th century; Pavilion or baradari, Old house and Garden house on east side were built in 20th century. Collectively these buildings are giving vigorous impression to the structure because of harmonized and brilliant use of structural designs made of timber wood, latticework, woodcarvings stone and rubble masonry. Current study concentrates on the construction style of the elements and surface decoration like woodcarving, pinjra kari, dhajji dewari, and mashrabiya. Carved design motives on wood are a unique part of the surface decoration of the fort. The detailed study of woodcarving, pinjra kari, dhajji diwari, mashrabiya, baradari or pavilion and massive walled structure of the building not only endorses their antiquity but also explores indigenous trends, different influences on the design motives and aesthetically rich ambiance of river steam and cherry gardens.

Key words: wood carvings, mashrabiya, latticework, decorative motives, baradari, influences.

Introduction

Skardu a rich land full of natural eye-catching views also has exceptional architectural heritage. The residents of the area are familiar with the use of stone, mud and timber wood as major architectural materials for construction. Use of rubble masonry and stone masonry is common practice for the building construction of the northern areas of Pakistan. In Baltistan almost all historical buildings are constructed and decorated with stone masonry and woodwork as major decorative element.

Shigar Fort Skardu Baltistan also known as Fong Khar in native language defined as palace on rock constructed by the local inhabitant Raja Hassan Khan Amarchar in 1634 AD. Gradually with the passage of time it was going smashed. In 1999 Raja Muhammad Ali Shah Saba donated the building to Aga Khan Cultural Service Pakistan and it was upgraded and restored by them. After restoration they tried to maintain traditional artifacts in their original form. After restoration in 2005 it was owned by the owner of Sareena hotel Islamabad, and the fort was served as hotel ensuring that its function remains residential.¹ The main hall and few adjacent rooms operated as a museum of Balti art and culture, containing historical remaining of architectural elements of fine woodcarvings and local artifacts.

The Shigar Fort complex is located on high rock in Baltistan region 30kms from Skardu town. Shigar stream on its south side with high glaciers and attractive landscape is giving strong impact to the monument's elevation. It is based on five buildings adjacent to each other with different roof levels, built in different time periods (plate 1). Raja's mosque on south-east entrance is small size single room structure and Raja Fort Palace on north side has thirteen rooms with contiguous Cherry and Amacha gardens on north and east sides. Both monuments are unique and originally built in the 17th century. Pavilion or *baradari*, old house and garden house on east side built in 20th century, collectively, these buildings are giving solid look to the structure because of the harmonized and brilliant use of timber wood structural design of latticework, woodcarvings and rubble masonry.

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¹ Interview with Mr. Shams Khan caretaker of the fort complex. (Dated 23rd December, 2017)

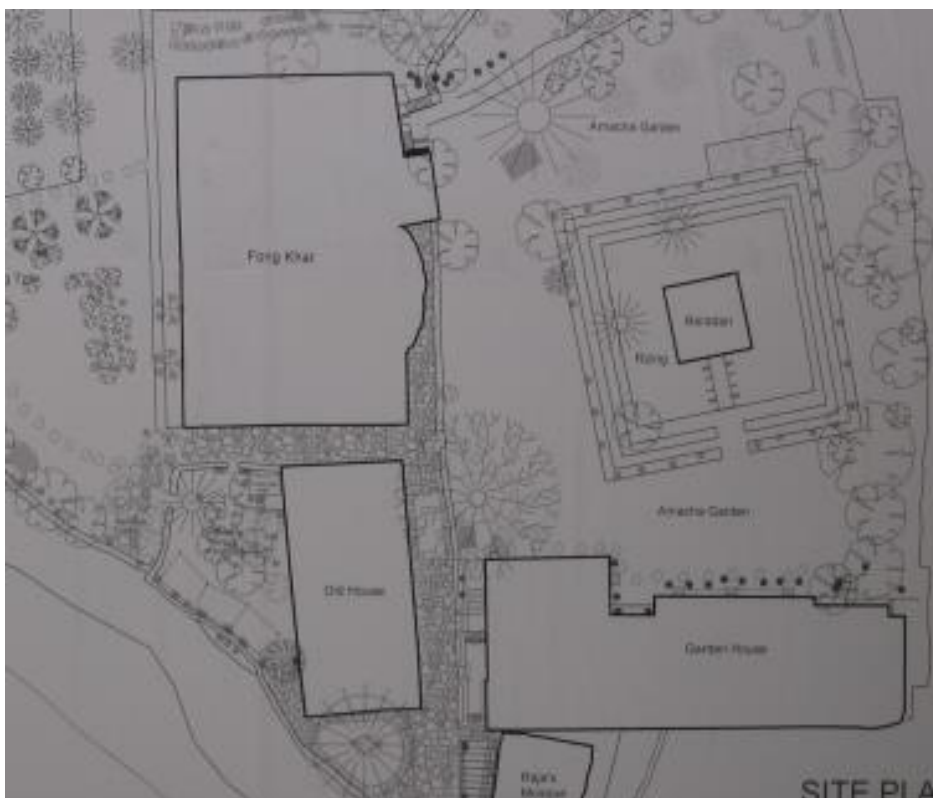


Plate 1. Plan of Shigar Fort Baltistan

Source: https://archnet.org/sites/5325/media_contents/42156 (accessed 9 January 2018)



Plate 2. Imposing view of the Shigar Fort Complex House of the complex.



Plate 3. Façade of Old Resident House of the complex.

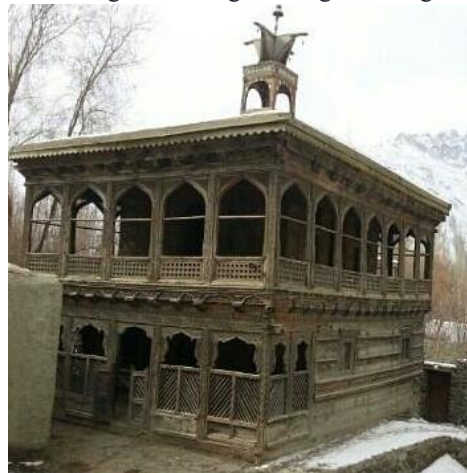
Imposing view of the fort complex

The external boundary walls of the complex are built in bonded rubble stone. The main entrance door and windows are made of wood in solid form and the floor is paved in compressed earth (plate 2). The leading entrance is from the south side with a simplified enormous door in timber wood. The most striking element of the building from its beginning to end is its stone structure. Massive appearance of over all stone paved floors, use of *dhaji diwari* and latticework are giving unique impact to the building. Stone and timber as major building materials are abruptly used for its overall construction and ornamentation for the sack of solidity. The properly hammered dressed stonework is laid in regular courses with virtuous quality.

Exterior of the Monument

Old resident house as entrance building of the complex become attraction of the visitor because of its unique façade based on double story. On ground level four broad openings lead to the veranda, facing massive rubble stonewall with an entrance door to approach the interior of the building and the adjustment of two rectangular shape wooden benches for visitors. These openings are equally divided with carved wood slender piers offering vertical support to the terrace on the first floor. The width of the wooden terrace is divided into ten sections in the form of carefully designed composition of linear wooden fences providing balance composition to frontage. In these ten sections, five are covered with diagonally composed perforated wooden

lattice design and five are covered till three feet high and the upper part is open, which makes two main sections (plate 3). The crossbeam timber roof is resting on a series of wooden planks forming the eave. The existing design of latticework of Raja's resident house is in diagonal arranged straight lined geometry. The complex has latticework as a major decorative exterior. Many old houses and monumental the area have remarkable balconies with or pinjra kari , as seen in Chqchan Mosque built in Amburiq Mosque built in 14th century, (plate 4, architecture in Azad Jamu Kashmir (Muzafrabad) similarity with the latticework of Resident House Fort in diagonal composition (Plate 6). Taqchi of building of Kashmir with pinjra kari built in three back has also rectilinear design (plate 7).



element of buildings of latticework 1370 and 5). Wooden has of Shigar another decades



Plate 4. Chaqchan Mosque built in 1370, its completed in 2011. Source: <https://pamirtimes.net>. February, 2019) <https://www.tripadvisor.in>



renovation was Mosque (accessed 16 Source:

https://twitter.com/pid_gov/status/1063687559224717312 (accessed 18 January, 2018) (accessed 16 February, 2019)



Plate 6. Wooden architecture of historical building Azad Jamu Kashmir (Muzafrabad) with lattice work.

Plate 7. *Pinjra kari* of historical Jamu Kashmir (Muzafrabad).

Source: <https://tribune.com.pk/story/567421>
 Source: <https://scroll.in/magazine/837729/>
 (accessed 28 January, 2018)
 (accessed 18 January, 2018)



Plate 8. Eastern wall of the Old Resident House adjacent to the main entrance of the complex, with *dhajji diwari* and window with woodcarving.



Plate 10. Raja Mosque



Plate 9. Wood carving designs of Raja Mosque Shigar complex of Amburiq Mosque Baltistan, built

Plate 10. Woodcarving designs in 14th century.

Turning to right from the façade of the resident house, heavily carved windows enhance the beauty of massive walls built in traditional *dhajji dewari* technique giving sturdiness to the structure (plate 8). Wooden planks are composed within the rubble stone-wall for its solidity and durability. Freezes with woodcarving are set upwards the square windows. The floriated stylized and geometric designs are skillfully carved with the complexity of their heights. The wood carving of the window frame betrays similarity of design with the carved windows of Raja Mosque of the complex.

Raja Mosque adjacent to the east of main entrance of the complex has unique classy woodwork with verity of geometric designs (plate 9). Its original structure reveals uniqueness of skilled artistic approach towards *dhajji diwari* and wood carving on freezes and windows' frames in timber wood. The rectilinear and curvilinear geometric designs of the windows of the mosque are similar to the window's wood carving designs of Amburiq Mosque of the same region built in 14th century (plate 10). Its wooden ceiling is in traditional technique, which is common practice of the inhabitants and still in practice. Ceiling of Baltit Fort is also similar to the ceiling of Shigar Fort.



Historical building of the Shigar Fort

The historical building of Shigar Fort is located

behind the Raja house of the complex and its entrance interior of the fort is from east side. Unique decorative built form and on surface of this multi storied structure are *mashrabiya*² screens, multifold arches, woodcarvings with decorative geometric, stylized designs and scalloped or arches.

From the entrance of the complex, balcony on the the fort is the major attraction of the exterior of the (plate 11). It is embellished with *mashrabiya* screens with geometrical designs. Such kinds of designs are also repeated screens set in the fort (plate 12). These screens are arranged the required composition of the monument and their designs have importance of their own with balanced compositions of square and rectangular shapes. The geometric shapes are organized into different units, which interlocking into interesting configurations. The designs are the panels as a whole appears like one unique design. Light enters the building through these *mashrabiya* screens. The designs of screens allow to control sun in summer and cold in extreme winter season. Geometric patterns with squares and rectangles are composed in these *mashrabiya* screens have similarity with Kashmiri *mashrabiya* designs.

In South Asian region the art of *mashrabiya* was introduced by Mughals from the Persian *khatamkari*³ that was also made in Central Asia (<http://www.greaterkashmir.com>). Buildings of Mughal period, Khaplu palace Baltistan, built in 17th century, *taqchi* of Kashmiri buildings and balcony of Jilali house Sirinagar are the prominent examples of the presence of this art in South Asian region (plate 13). Rectilinear geometrical shapes are organized in different units, which are interlocking into interesting combinations. The designs are repeated in the panels as a whole appears like one unique design.



Plate 11. Balcony with *mashrabiya* screens on the South wall of the Fort



Plate 12. A view of perforated of balcony from interior.

towards the elements in balcony, variety of multifold

south wall of monument rectilinear in the other according to geometrical

rectilinear are repeated in

² *Mashrabiya* is an architectural element; it is a type of carved wood latticework in open frame work based on rectilinear geometric patterns. The design is created by crossing the strips to form the network.

³ *Khatamkari* is also decorative art for buildings, usually used for ceilings made of wood with geometrical patterns.

Plate 13. *Pinjra kari* Art and *mashrabia* screens multifolied arches with latticework on Kashmiri building. Source: <http://gaatha.com/pinjra-kari> (accessed 22nd February, 2018)

Plate 14. Room interior with wooden

Interior of the Monument

Dhaji diwari technique is primarily used for the walls of the Shigar Fort. Beside other decorative elements scalloped or multi foiled arches are also a part of its architectural decoration giving grace to the interior of the fort (plate 14). These arches with Mughal influence are constructed for the embellishment of the rooms' interior of the residential area of the fort. The upper part of scalloped or multi foiled arched openings intricate screens of *pinjra kari*. Such kind of arches closed to cusp or multi foiled arches were abundantly used in Mughal period's Hayat Bukhsh Bagh and Rang Mehal in Red Fort built by the Mughal ruler Shah Jahan in 1639 A.D. Jamia Masjid old Delhi completed in 1656 A.D. all are prominent example of scalloped arches.

Wood carving as major surface decoration of the Fort

Original wood carvings of the fort are on display in the main hall which serves as museum after the

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which museum



serves as museum after the

restoration of the building. The interior also features traditional indigenous artifacts of the area, a few historical maps, books, woodwork, and architectural history. The greater part of the artifacts is based on woodcarvings of the columns, doors friezes, beams and ceiling bands, in stylized, realistic foliated and geometric designs. Extensive panels of woodcarving are divided into several small parts in squares and rectangles forming a series of different designs with individual design compositions creating an illusion of unity on distinctive panels or parts. Snake, birds or doves with stylized patterns, wheel, Swastika surrounded by a square shape carving in the middle of a regular polygon, a triangle with a composition of several triangles in it, floral wheel or chakra, floral pattern that express rhythmic continuity, complex pattern, circle within a circle with stylized floral motives, which makes rhythmic composition of geometrical designs all are the part of panels of woodcarvings done for the beautification of the interior of the fort (plate 15, 16). Rectilinear and curvilinear geometrical compositions are largely in the support of symmetrical designs of different parts of friezes showing a great uniformity. Few design compositions presenting their selves as stamps because of their novelty. The wood carvings on these decorative elements are richly embellished with floral and geometric designs and the style of the carvings reflects regional and Kashmiri influences. The woodwork of Chaqchan Mosque Khaplu built in 14th century, shows the similarities of its regional style. The rectilinear carved designs and ceiling construction style of the Amburiq Mosque of the region window has similarity with the design of Shigar Fort. Wood carving in Khaplu Palace residence in Baltistan built in mid 19th century has also rich surface decoration of wood carving similar to these designs. It has excellent stone masonry, wooden balcony and latticework but in different designs. The wooden doors belong to Northern areas of Pakistan are skillfully designed and carved express importance of the technique as surface decoration of the monuments (Hasan, 1986).



Plate 15. Wooden friezes with rhythmic continuity of design pattern.

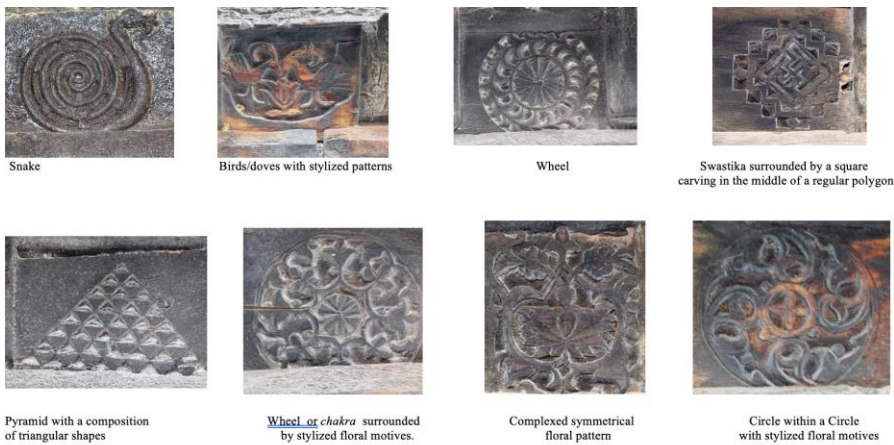


Plate 16. Different Designs in wood carving of the Interior.

Amacha Garden and Baradari of the Complex

In early 20th century, on north side of the historical building of Shigar Fort, Amacha Gardens with baradari or pavilion were constructed. Pavilion on the central platform surrounded by a pool was built by Raja Muhammad Adam Khan, the father of the Raja Muhammad Ali Saba, enhances the beauty of the area (plate 17). The area is planned with historic perspective with water channels formed a large water tank surrounding the square planned building. In the history of South Asian architecture, gardens and water have played a vital part to enhancing the aesthetics of the buildings. In this pavilion the ditch around the platform with water pool is recalling history belongs to the 14th century and the tomb of Ghiyasuddin Tughlaq was the first one who built in the artificial lake to create aesthetics with building reflections. Later on in Mughal Period Kamran Baradari built in 1540 by Kamran Mirza and Hiran Minar built in 1606 by emperor Jahangir standing in a water body are perfect examples of such kind buildings (plate 18). The structure of the pavilion is square in plan skillfully carved white marble bases are supporting freestanding wooden shafts as vertical support of the ceiling. Artistic characteristic of the marble bases associates the excellence of Kashmiri buildings of the high Mughal style as seen in the prayer hall of Aali Masjid Kashmir built in 15th century (plate 19). Such kind of quality bases are not found in the construction of any other building of Shigar town at the time of the construction of the pavilion. The platform of the pavilion rises with a stone base, has stone masonry, ten feet higher than its ground level. The sophisticated geometrical designs latticework similar to residential building of the fort complex is giving a classy impression to the site.



Plate 17. Baradari or pavilion in the Shigar Fort Complex in Mughal Period

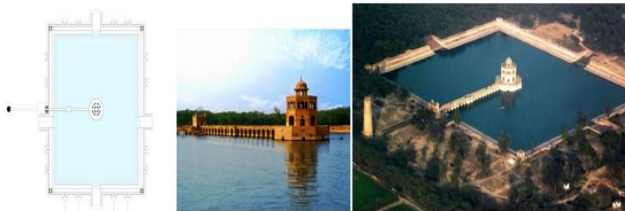


Plate 18. View of Hiran Minar built

Source:

<http://www.dostpakistan.pk/hiran-minar/> (accessed 22nd February, 2018)



Plate 19. Restored prayer hall of Aali Masjid Kashmir built in 15th century has similarity with the bases of pillars built in the pavilion of Shigar Fort complex.

Source: <https://mykashmirvalley.wordpress.com> (accessed 22nd February, 2018)

Amacha Garden with regional and historical influences

The former gardens designed by Mughals called paradise gardens were differently composed than these Amacha Gardens, Cherry Gardens and pavilion. Mughal gardens were pre-planned equally divided into four parts having flowerbeds, fountains with water channels and raised pathways had concept of *Char bagh* and terraces. *Shalimar bagh*, *Nishat bagh*, *Achabal bagh*, *Chashma Shahi* and *Pari Mahal* all these Mughal gardens of northern areas of South Asian region have developed from their earliest prototypes. But in the case of gardens around Shigar Fort, these cherry gardens deal with aesthetics to provide rich ambiance toward surroundings of the fort with different types of fruit-bearing trees, unusual aromatic herbs in the garden and cherry trees in abundance with natural stream on east side are providing aesthetics.

Contribution of Aga Khan associate and use of similar design of *mashrabiya* screens in Sareena Hotel Islamabad.

Preservation and renovation of the historical site was good decision by Raja and Aga Khan association. They performed beautiful job to provide facilities and viewing traditional crafts and art persevered in the main hall of the residential area which serves as a museum. The fort attracts thousands of visitors. Most tourists visit from March to November. Most tourists do not visit in cooler months of December, January and February because of extremely cold weather less tourists visit the area and the exterior of the fort can only be viewed, rooms, and the museum of the building are locked. The hotel is closed and services are not provided in these three months. Similar designs of *mashrabiya* screens of the Shigar Fort complex are applied to enhance the beauty of the exterior of the Sareena Hotel Islamabad (plate 20).



Plate 20. Exterior of the Sareena hotel, Islamabad.

Conclusion

The study presents a complete visit of the Shigar Fort Complex and emphasizes on the archaeological importance and architectural decoration of the Fort Complex in constructive form and on surface. Geometrical and stylized floral motives are composed in the form of woodcarvings for the surface decoration of different places of the fort. In present research regional trends of architectural decoration, design motives in woodwork, regional and Mughal influences on lattice work, *mashrabiya* and *baradari* or pavilion are discussed in detail. Massive wall structure of the building with the implementation of *dhajji diwari* and aesthetically rich ambiance of river stream and cherry gardens all are the part of this study.

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