

Pavilion Restoration in the Bagh-e Babur

The Bagh-e Babur, once again one of Kabul's most popular green spaces, was constructed by Babur, founder of the Mogul dynasty that ruled much of South Asia from 1526-1857. The 11-acre "hanging garden," set on a hillside and watered by a stream from above, became the emperor's burial place after his death in Lahore in 1530. His heirs regarded the garden as a place of reverence.

At its center stands a 100-year-old pavilion, restored by the Aga Khan Trust with the help of international donations including a grant in 2002 from the U.S. Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation. Jolyon Leslie, Chief Executive Officer of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture in Kabul, speculates that the late 18th century Afghan ruler Amir Abdur Rahman Khan, whose palace stands near the pavilion he built, may have used it to entertain guests. Above it sits Babur's tomb and a small, white, marble mosque commissioned by Shah Jehan, 17th century builder of the Taj Mahal, to honor his ancestor.

With the decline of the Mogul empire in Afghanistan, the garden deteriorated, and an earthquake damaged its structures in 1842. Despite restorations by Khan, and later by King Nadir Shah in the 1930s, decades of neglect, 23 years of war and four years of drought destroyed the gardens and damaged the buildings. The pavilion lost its doors, windows and roof, although the ceiling survived. Matching the surviving ceiling tiles was one of the most difficult parts of the process and they are now among the building's most eye-catching features for Kabulis who enjoy the replanted garden.

High above the Bagh-e Babur sits the Noon Gun hilltop platform. For more than 100 years, a pair of 19th century cannons were fired each day to mark the noon hour. In 2005 the U.S. Embassy provided financial support for the reconstruction of this historical site.



Restoration of the Mullah Mahmood Mosque

The Mullah Mahmood Mosque is a treasure brought back from the brink of oblivion. A rare 17th century wooden structure at the heart of Kabul's old city, the mosque serves ordinary Kabulis in a neighborhood still scarred by the factional conflict that tore the city apart in the mid-1990s. Doors, window frames and rare cedar paneling from the ceiling were used for firewood or blown away by gunfire and shrapnel.

Currently named for a 20th century religious leader, the mosque's original builder and year of construction remain unknown. Its two-story design includes a trapdoor so the sermon can be repeated to the congregation on the ground floor. More than 1,000 devotees can worship in the huge edifice.

Initial restoration work, to keep the structure from collapsing, was funded by a grant from the U.S. Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation in 2003. An additional U.S. Embassy grant helped complete the job, and the mosque reopened in 2004.

The first task was to remove unexploded ordnance and human remains. Thousands of bricks, baked to match the originals, fit into the rebuilt floor. Gypsum plasterwork was restored based on surviving decoration. It took 45 workers more than two months just to remove 400 years of oil paint from the cedar pillars, which had also been damaged by shrapnel and bullets. Every pillar in the mosque today is original.

Workers dismantled the roof, replaced the lintels and restored the paneled ceiling, although cedar matching the quality of the original is no longer available in Kabul. They also rebuilt the heating system and cleared an underground drainage channel running all the way to the Kabul River. With the help of the United States, the historic Mullah Mahmood Mosque is again open to the public.

