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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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From Heritage to Living Culture: Adaptive Re-use of Historic Caves for the Promotion of Traditional Crafts and Regional Identity

Fatima Farid ^a Salman Jamil ^b Ghousia Saeed ^c Raza Kazim ^d

Corresponding Author: Fatima Farid; fatima-farid@paf-iast.edu.pk



Abstract: The abandonment of historic sites has resulted in the deterioration of their physical fabric, cultural significance, and surrounding landscapes. Abandoned sites can be revitalized by introducing experiential building programs. This study aims to introduce an experiential Art and Craft Center that not only revives the original character of the site through its Architectural vocabulary but also proposes such programs that aims at maintaining the continuity of traditional crafts. The study explores the possibilities and potentials of reusing the abandoned masses along with adaptive reuse as a conservation strategy. The design investigates how abandoned caves can be used as art galleries with minimal intervention so the original character remains the same. It discusses the importance of revitalization of intangible characteristics that are attached to site along with tangible aspects. Study explores this idea with a program comprising workshops, exhibition spaces, cultural bazaars, and public gathering areas that can restore cultural landscape, promote traditional crafts, and enhance visitor experience. The importance of site's historical influences and their impact on the revival of site's original character is explored through introduction of Art and Craft center and how this can support tourism, local artisans, and the long-term conservation of heritage through adaptive reuse.

Keywords: Adaptive Reuse, Cultural Landscape, Heritage Conservation, Historic Caves, Art and Craft Centre, Cultural Tourism, Regional Identity

Introduction

Architectural history serves as tangible representation of society's history, culture and identity. Historic sites if preserved properly can benefit the values and traditions that evolved overtime. These respective sites are not just physical remains of the past but act as reminders thus help people remember their cultural roots. However many heritage structures have lost their original function due to abandonment. Modern methods and philosophies of protecting heritage buildings recommends giving old buildings a new purpose instead of demolishing them. This approach of adaptive reuse helps the buildings to retain their purpose and remain useful for more years (Douglas, 2006; JOKILEHTO, 1986).

Art and craft centers act as important platforms for preserving and promoting traditional craftsmanship. Creating such spaces where cultural knowledge and artisanal skills can be practiced can benefit generations. Art and craft centers not only preserve old skills but also help people feel connected to their culture by

^a Lecturer, School of Design Art and Architecture Technologies, Pak-Austria Fachhochschule Institute of Applied Sciences and Technology, Mang, Haripur, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan.

^b Associate Professor, School of Design Art and Architecture Technologies, Pak-Austria Fachhochschule Institute of Applied Sciences and Technology, Mang, Haripur, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan.

^c Assistant Professor, Department of Architecture University of Engineering and Technology Peshawar, Abbottabad Campus, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, Pakistan.

^d Senior Architect RK STUDIOS, Design Firm, Islamabad, Pakistan.

encouraging them to participate in cultural activities (e.g., workshops, exhibitions, festivals), and support local craftsmen and artisans to continue practicing and earning from their traditional skills (Smith, 2006). Converting old historic places into cultural spaces (such as museums, art galleries, or art and craft centers) helps preserve the actual fabric of heritage and cultural practices associated with them. This approach allows heritage to remain an active and meaningful part of the society while safeguarding its authenticity and cultural significance (Orbasli, 2007).

Research Methodology

The research follows a qualitative, design based research approach. This methodology focuses on understanding the basics of art and craft centers designed in abandoned heritage structures through case study analysis. The research investigates the site selection criteria for integration of heritage conservation with contemporary cultural functions. The study aims to develop an architectural proposal that transforms the abandoned historic landmarks into an *Art and Craft Centre*. This approach of adaptive reuse will help in the promotion of traditional crafts, cultural tourism, and regional identity, while preserving the historical significance of the site.

Literature review

Architectural Heritage as Collective Memory

Architectural Heritage is taken as a physical record of cultural identity, historical continuity and social values. It is continuously argued that heritage structures are not just remains of materials but symbolic representation of collective memory that connects past and present societies (Rossi, 1984). People living in different societies have different traditions, preferences and culture it is because of the built heritage they interact with unintentionally daily which somehow contributes in forming their identity. Heritage acts as a cultural process that shapes identity over time (Lowenthal, 1985).

Deterioration of Abandoned Heritage Site

Abandonment of buildings leads to physical decay which result in loss of cultural value. When structures are neither used nor maintained, it leads to loss of functional role this is also probably due to weathering factors which effects material layering, causing cracks and partial collapses this in result cause their deterioration to speed up (Plevoets & Van Cleempoel). With this the cultural value also tends to decline and diminishes over time. The community connection and historical memory associated with the site also fades. Therefore adaptive intervention is essential to prevent such damage which is irreversible (Feilden, 2003).

Adaptive re-use as a conservation Strategy

Adaptive reuse refers to a sustainable approach where conserving Heritage body requires retaining and restoring cultural significance. This approach not only safeguards tangible heritage but also strengthens the connection between communities and their cultural identity. Adaptive reuse prevents buildings from deterioration, enabling them to remain functional and relevant within society while maintaining their historical character. It reduces construction wastes, extends the life cycle of existing buildings and also cuts the environmental impacts associated with demolition and new construction (Bullen & Love, 2011). Adaptive Re-use plays an important role in sustainable urban regeneration. Repurposed heritage buildings can encourage tourism stimulating the economic activity (Arfa et al., 2022).

From Static Monuments to Living Heritage

Modern heritage conservation practices are rejecting the idea that heritage buildings can just be inactive objects. It proposes to focus on keeping them as “living” cultural spaces. In order to make such spaces meaningful and relevant it is important to integrate community participation, cultural practices, and even small-scale economic activities (Poulios, 2014). Veldpaus et al. (2013) on the other hand says that there

should be dynamic heritage management, where heritage should not be considered as a completed project but an evolving process. He believes that heritage management requires continuous monitoring; this approach ensures that conservation strategies remain relevant and effective over time (Plevoets & Van Cleempoel, 2019).

Traditional Craft as Intangible Heritage

Traditional craft represents the knowledge of the skills and cultural practices that are passed down through generations. This work serves as cultural identity and collective memory, making it an essential part of cultural heritage. These traditions can only survive through continuous practice and transmission. Craftsmanship is a key domain of intangible cultural heritage, which is at risk of disappearance and needs to be safeguarded for future generations (UNESCO, 2003). Traditional crafts are a source of cultural continuity. Heritage buildings can provide spaces for practice, display, and promotion of traditional crafts. When observed through the lens of Adaptive reuse, this allows tangible and intangible heritage to be preserved simultaneously. The approach of adaptive reuse transforms historic sites into active cultural spaces that support cultural transmission and community engagement (Nas, 2002).

Craft-Based Cultural and Economic Development

Craft production acts as a core key in the preservation of culture; it also contributes to creating employment opportunities, which boosts local economies. Craft centers also provide artisans with dedicated spaces to produce, display, and market their work; this helps to sustain traditional skills while enhancing the cultural identity of a region. Connecting heritage with local craftsmanship through these centers can encourage cultural exchange and generate economic benefits for surrounding communities (Richards, 2018a). Creative industries, which include traditional crafts, can contribute to sustainable economic growth. This generates income by supporting local entrepreneurship and reinforcing the long-term conservation of cultural heritage. The approach of promoting traditional crafts through heritage sites demonstrates how both can simultaneously preserve cultural identity and support community-based economic development (Richards, 2018b).

Architecture and Regional Identity

Architecture plays a significant role in expressing regional identity. Many historians guess the cultural practices, religious and political influences of a certain era by just analyzing the architectural structures. The design and form of a respective building is a blend of the values and lifestyles of the communities that created them. Architectural masses help to preserve the long lost culture and values. These structures act as collective memories (Norberg-Schulz, 1980). Built environment is shaped by cultural values, social customs and human behaviors, they aren't just a set of functional and environmental factors. These approaches highlight that conserving and adaptively reusing historic architecture can help maintain regional identity while allowing heritage places to remain meaningful (Rapoport, 1969).

Cultural Landscapes and Regional Identity

Cultural Landscapes have broadened the concept of heritage. It states that monuments are not just individual structures but they enhance the environment and promote the interaction between natural settings and human activity. Cultural landscapes represent the relationship between communities and their environments, these reflect historical, social, religious, and economic processes that have shaped a place over time. This perspective clears the idea that the identity of a region is formed through the combined influence of natural features, built heritage, and the cultural practices that are associated with them (Convention, 1992). Regional identity is somewhere linked to cultural landscapes which are shaped over time composing traditions and values of local communities within them. These cultural Landscapes need to be conserved as conserving them not only protects physical features but also safeguards the cultural meanings and sense of place attached to them. Adaptive reuse emphasizes on the preservation of both the historic setting and its

associated cultural activities because it strengthens community identity while ensuring that heritage remains relevant to the respective society (Taylor, 2009).

Adaptive Reuse of Historic caves as Cultural Spaces

Historic caves possess both natural and cultural significance. Caves have served as multifunctional spaces through history. Some have used it as shelter while other have used it as a worshipping space. Multiple caves have lost their purpose due to abandonment or underutilization which resulted in physical deterioration and loss of cultural relevance. Adaptive reuse offers an opportunity to transform these spaces into active cultural environments while preserving their historical and architectural character (Plevoets & Van Cleempoel, 2019). Caves require sensitive interventions that respect their heritage value along with geological integrity. Caves when used for different purposes such as museums, exhibitions, art and craft centers, they can regain social relevance. The respective approach of adaptive reuse shows how heritage can be revitalized when you carefully plan conservation strategies which balance both preservation and contemporary use (Comer, 2019).

Integrating Tangible and Intangible Heritage through Adaptive Re-use

The concept of contemporary heritage preservation emphasizes that when buildings are preserved without sustaining the cultural practices associated with them, they are a body without soul. Adaptive reuse provides a framework for integrating tangible heritage, such as historic caves and architectural remains, with intangible heritage including traditional crafts, local knowledge, and cultural practices. When abandoned heritage sites are transformed into craft centers, the idea of conservation extends beyond the framework of restoration. This promotes and boosts cultural transmission, community participation, tourism development, and regional identity, which benefits communities (UNESCO, 2024).

Literature Review Findings

Literature review strongly criticizes the idea of restricting adaptive reuse of historical buildings to just “fabric restoration”. It also suggests applying a holistic framework of adaptive reuse where cultural practices are also reactivated along with community participation. A model that should create opportunities for the transmission of intangible heritage, which will help to strengthen regional identity. These findings provide the basis for case study analysis.

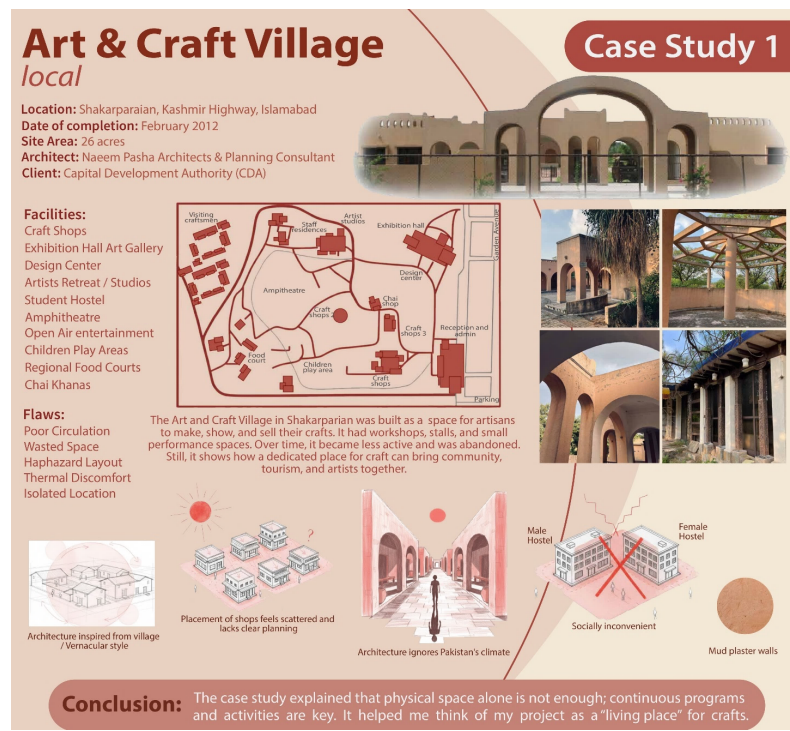
The selected case studies are examined not only for their architectural form but also for their functional organization, spatial connectivity, adaptive reuse strategies, craft-related activities, and relationship with the surrounding context. The findings from the case studies are then compared with the existing conditions of the Shah Allah Ditta Caves to develop an appropriate architectural program in accordance to its potential.

Case Studies

The case studies were selected to investigate two complementary aspects of the proposed project *one was the functional requirements of an art and craft center and second, the architectural strategies involved in adapting cave-like or historic spaces for contemporary cultural use.*

1. A local art and craft village can be studied in order to understand building program and spatial connectivity of the spaces. Art and Craft Village located in Shakarparian, Islamabad designed by Naeem Pasha Architects is one of the most convenient example of what it requires to design Art and Craft Village. The case helps in knowing the local crafts of Islamabad along with the user. The village provides an opportunity and platform to the craft-men so they can display and sale their crafts. This also helps the “cultural skill” to pass on to next generations which also boosts a sustainable heritage environment (Pakistani, 2026). The detailed case study is as under:

Figure 1



2. Similarly a case study of Lebanon “Kahf el Founoun” can be witnessed where art and crafts were promoted through caves. Caves that were abandoned were utilized under the framework of adaptive reuse. The whole building program is well organized through human friendly circulation that’s engaging and boosts a sense of curiosity (Agency, 2015). The case study demonstrates how spaces can be revitalized by applying strategies of adaptive reuse. The detailed case study is as under:

Figure 2

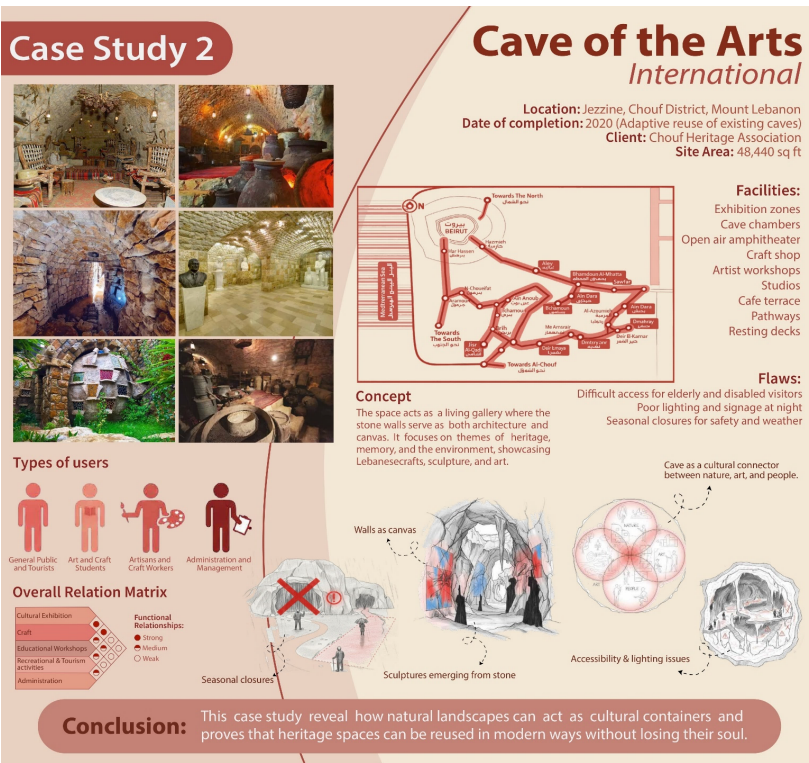


Table 1

Analytical Aspect	Art & Craft Village	Kahf el Founoun	Design Outcome for Proposed Project
Primary function	Art and craft production, display, and sale	Cultural and artistic activities with in adapted cave spaces	Combine craft production, learning, exhibition, and commercial activities
Craft activities	Provides spaces for artisans and local crafts	Supports artistic and cultural activities	Provide dedicated workshops for traditional crafts
Visitor experience	Visitors interact with craft and cultural activities	Circulation creates curiosity and exploration	Create a sequential visitor journey through the site
Spatial organization	Separate but related functional spaces	Existing cave spaces are adapted to new uses	Organize functions according to existing site conditions
Heritage relationship	Promotes local cultural identity	Reuses existing cave structures	Preserve the caves while introducing compatible new functions
Cultural transmission	Crafts can be displayed and passed to future generations	Cultural activities reactivate abandoned spaces	Include workshops, demonstrations, and learning spaces
Economic function	Craft display and sale	Cultural attraction and tourism	Include retail and markets paces for artisans
Landscape/context	Relationship with the cultural setting	Cave and surrounding environment contribute to experience	Integrate the proposed center with the Margalla landscape
Circulation	Movement between craft-related functions	Exploratory movement through cave spaces	Develop a clear but experiential circulation system (walking tracks)

Case Study Outcomes

Case study analysis demonstrates that the proposed Art and craft center requires such a building program that’s a set of production, learning, exhibition, commercial and community-oriented spaces. It also indicates that such a circulation should be introduced which is experiential and its design has the ability to connect visitors with the process of craft production. The circulation should be well carved that it creates an experiential understanding of the heritage site. In addition, the frame work of adaptive reuse demonstrates that caves can be revitalized when you allow the existing spatial character influence the placement of new functions rather than imposing a completely independent building program. These findings provide the basis of examining the Shah Allah Ditta Caves along with developing a site-specific architectural program.

Site

Selection Criteria

Literature suggested that cultural landscapes needs to be conserved as they hold regional identity. Cultural Landscapes represents a strong connection between human activities and natural settings that gets develop gradually overtime. These landscapes serve as important landmarks that hold cultural identity and collective

memory. In this respective context, caves are chosen in order to explore the idea of integrating heritage conservation with contemporary cultural functions. Caves have historically accommodated multiple human activities which includes habitation, religious practices, social interaction, and other cultural functions. The richness of spatial character and continued association with human activity make historic caves significant sites for exploring adaptive reuse as a strategy for heritage conservation and cultural revitalization. The “**Shah Allah Ditta Caves**” are located within the Margalla Hills of Islamabad. The caves form part of historically and culturally significant landscape where natural features, built heritage, religious associations, and human activities are interconnected. Despite the historical value and tourism potential the site remains underutilized. This underutilization of such a prestigious site creates an opportunity to investigate adaptive reuse as a strategy for transforming the site into an active cultural environment.

Figure 3

Lush Green Encapsulation



Source: Author

Figure 3 show some old heavy branched trees that adds depth to the natural context of the site. There is an irregularity in the heights of the interior of the caves which make them unique and challenging at the same time.

Figure 4

Variation in the Interior of the Caves



Source: Author

Figure 3 and 4 demonstrate the lush green encapsulation and how the inside of the caves has a historical impact. The whole area has the potential to attract a number of tourists.

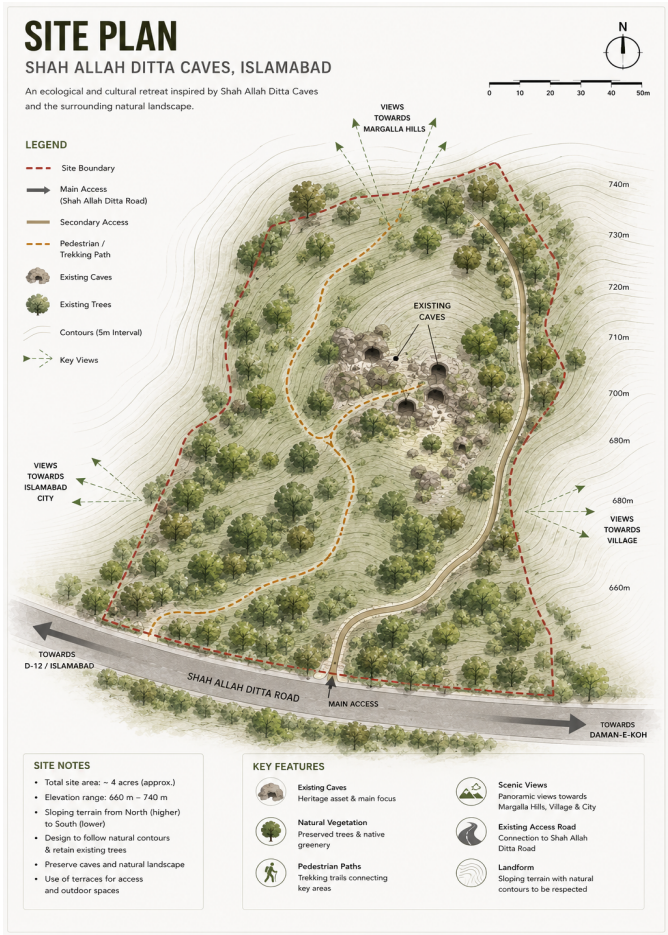
Figure 5
Exterior of the Caves



Source: Author

Site Data and Analysis

Figure 6
Site Data Sheet



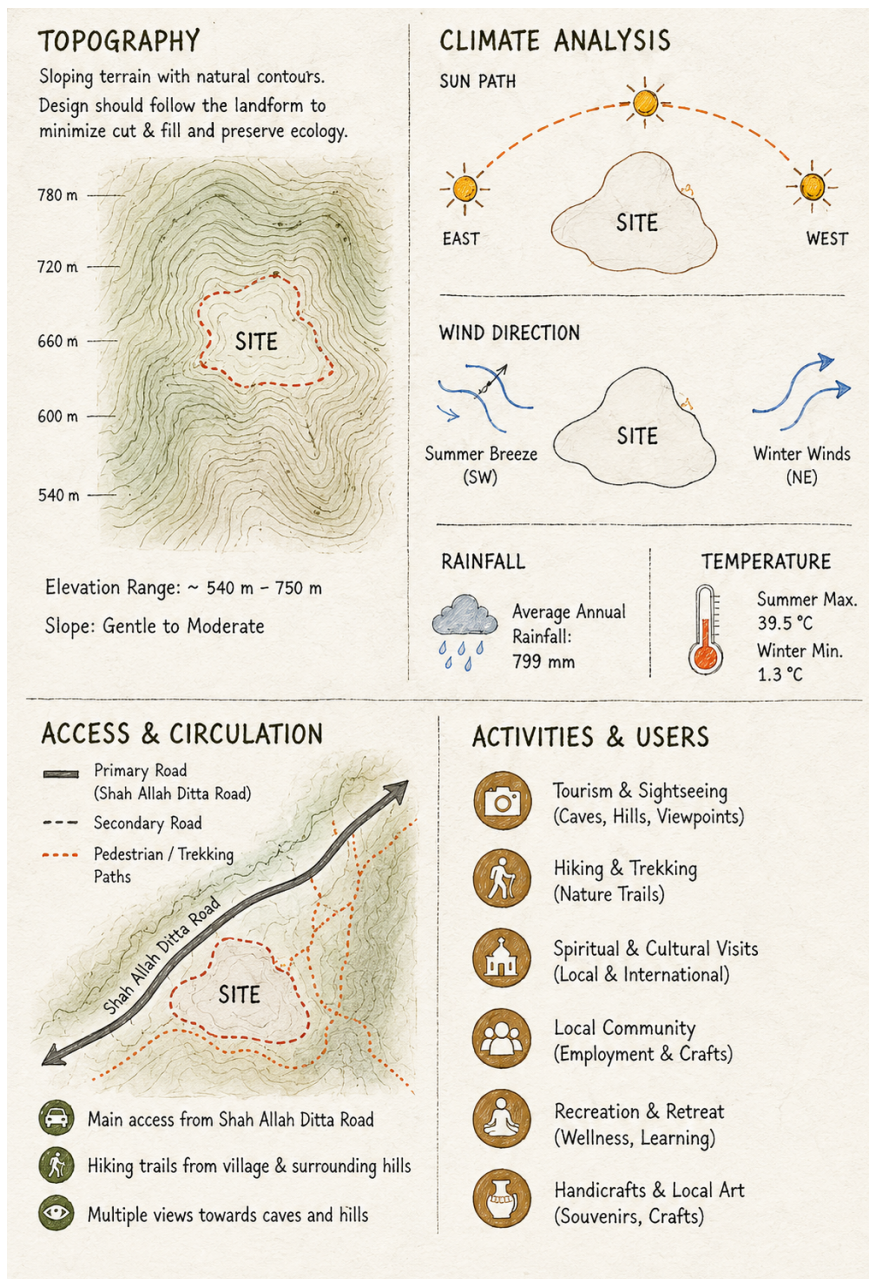
Source: Author

Site's Design Language

Figure 6 illustrates the key features of the site that can help in developing the form according to site requirements. It also shows the caves that are located within the site and can be adaptively reused according to the Architect's brief finalized. Figure 5 demonstrates the site parameters, access routes and activities that can be given according to site constraints and strengths. The site provides an opportunity to an art and craft center that promotes local creativity, traditional craftsmanship and also develops the natural character of the caves. The design should be such that it celebrates the cultural and historical layers of Shah Allah Ditta. Architectural forms (building masses) can be evolved from the historical influences of the site e.g. Buddhist and Islamic. The forms can be reinterpreted in contemporary design language which will help in bridging the gap between past and the present. The richness of site historical character can help in abstracting materials, forms, crafts and interior spaces rather than replicating the historical architectural eras.

Figure 7

Site Information

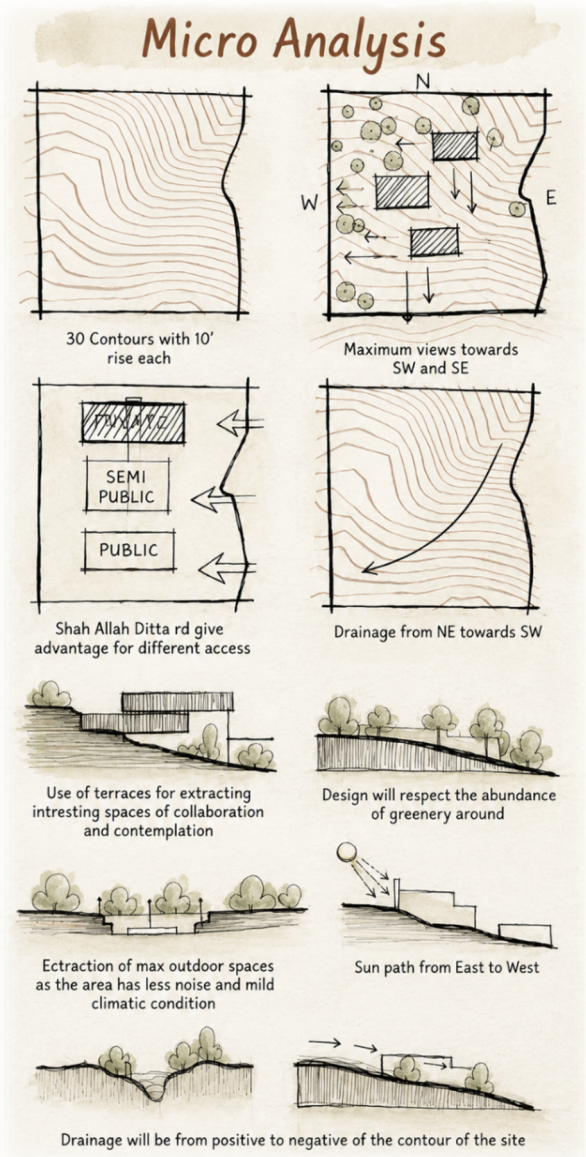


Source: Author

Table 2

Site Finding	Case Study Lesson	Design Implication
Caves are underutilized	Abandoned heritage can be reactivated through adaptive reuse	Introduce a new cultural function
Caves have irregular internal spaces	Cave-based cultural projects adapt functions to existing spaces	Avoid forcing a rigid conventional plan
Site has a strong natural landscape	Cultural projects can integrate architecture with landscape	Use outdoor gathering and cultural spaces
Site has historical associations	Heritage projects should preserve identity	Minimize intervention to existing caves
Site has tourism potential	Cultural centers can support economic activity	Include craft display and retail
Traditional crafts require transmission	Craft centers require production and learning spaces	Provide workshops and demonstration areas

Figure 8
Zoning Possibilities



Zoning

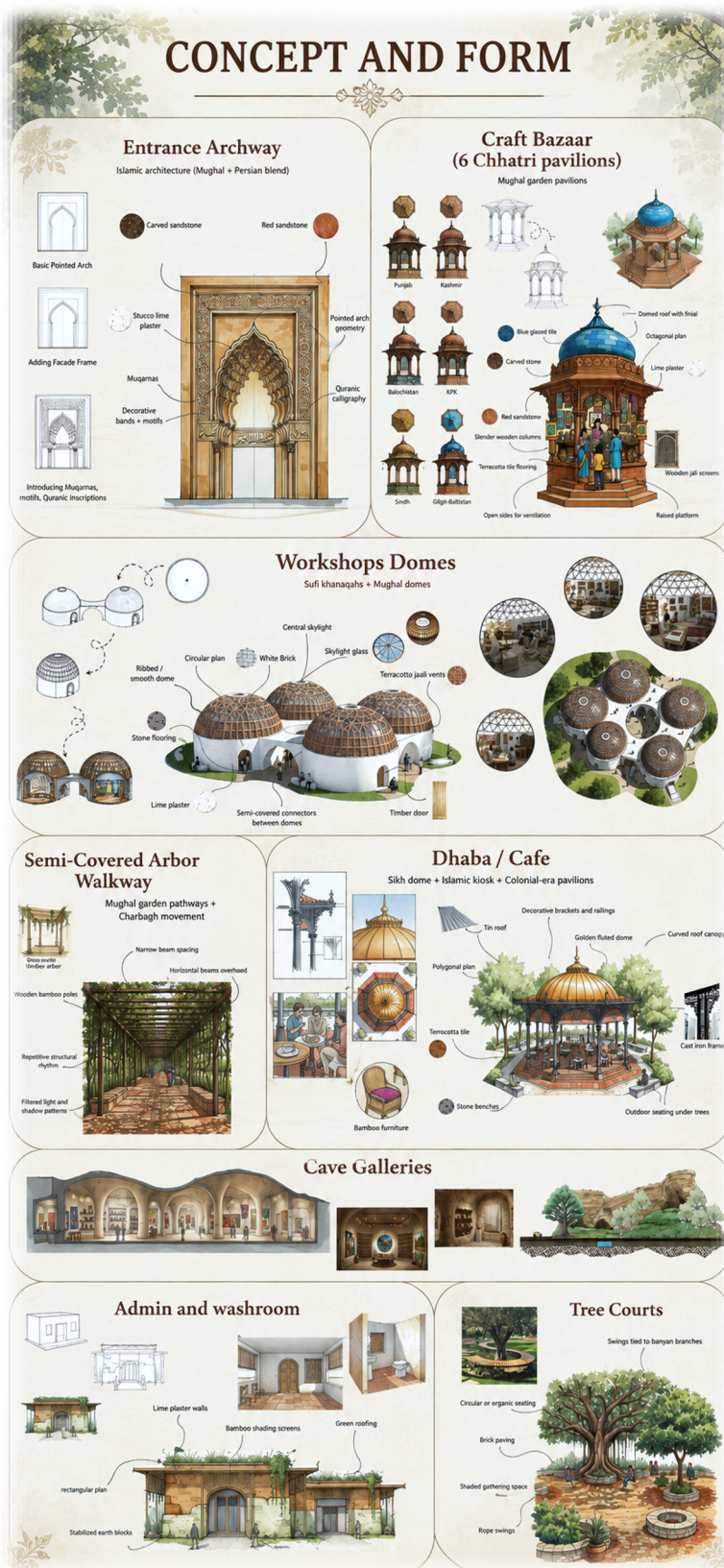
Figure 8 extracted from student’s work explains the possible design interventions according to site data stated in figure 5 and 4. For an Art and Craft Center to be designed in an already abandoned site it is important to figure out a building program that would be catchy and attract a number of tourists. As mentioned in Case study 1 and 2 it is important to retain the originality of the site even after possible design additions. The design should be such that it doesn’t changes the main nature of the site but adds charisma to its original character.

There-fore the site is divided into private, semi-private and public zones in order to create a balanced experience for visitors. Shah Allah Ditta road provides an opportunity to give different access points or to adjust parking anywhere according to the zoning requirement. The natural contoured encapsulation provides an opportunity to offer a variety of experiential spaces and activities where user can engage and spend a quality time.

Caves can work best as art galleries and exhibitions, where handmade crafts can be displayed creating a connection between human activity and natural character of the caves. This will add a different experience for the user. Open contoured area can be used for café, sitting spaces tracks and cultural bazar.

Overall, the design aims to merge **nature, culture, and tourism** by utilizing the site's natural features while creating meaningful experiences for visitors at the same time.

Figure 9
Details of the forms of Art & Craft Center



Form Development

As stated in the “site data and analysis” the site’s chronology connects to Islamic, Mughal and Buddhist origins therefore generating the forms using design ideologies from respective eras so the originality retains itself and the intangible factors are represented via tangible approaches. This whole concept can be visually observed in Figure 7 (extracted from student’s work) which examines Islamic, Mughal and Buddhist architectural principles. Islamic architecture is famous for its colossal entrances therefore using the symbolic *Iwan and Pishtaq coded entrance*. This will add a strong sense of historical grandeur, as soon as the visitor will pass through the entrance they will get an impression of the whole site this will also help them to understand the overall site’s theme before they begin to explore it. After passing from the arched gateway visitor will enter a “*Semi Covered Arbor Walkway*”.

This walkway was a famous part of Mughal era, which was used in order to give the user a sense of natural encapsulation yet making them move in a defined direction. The purpose was to make the walk of the user an experiential experience for them so they reach their desired destination without getting bored.

This makes the user to enter cultural pavilions which are given in order to represent the culture of different provinces of Pakistan. The cultural bazaar acts as a transition between the newly introduced architectural spaces and the historic caves, gradually preparing visitors for the heritage experience. This craft bazar represents different cultures

through traditional crafts from Baluchistan, Sindh, Punjab, KPK, Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan. The form of the respective pavilions is carved out of the Chatri Pavilions which serves as an important element in the Mughals which were actually inspired from Islamic Eras’s “Kiosks”. The glazing and other material is inspired from the same eras. These form inspirations play a vital role in reviving the original identity of the site so the

tangible and intangible aspects of the site are restored. As stated in the literature review, *the framework of the adaptive reuse highlights the importance of cultural revival along with the revitalization of historic structures for the transmission of culture.*

The semi covered walkway leads to caves. Art galleries are designed inside caves. The natural setting of the caves compliments the artworks, crafts, and cultural displays. This approach of Adaptive reuse allows the natural and built elements to merge seamlessly thus creating immersive experience for visitors. Workshops are given in order to maintain the continuity of hand skills along with crafts. Workshops allow visitors to observe and participate in the craft-making process, ensuring the transmission of traditional skills to future generations while creating an interactive cultural experience. The architectural vocabulary of the workshops follows Sufi styled khanqahs topped with Mughal styled domes. Over all these workshops follows a contemporary design language which are influence by historical eras. The site analysis shows old Banyan Trees which are used to adjust swings and sitting spaces. The overall architectural geometry is organic which makes it easy for the forms to blend in this contoured encapsulation. *Dhaba styled café* is provided at the right side of the site so the user can snack after exploring the site. This resting space encourages the visitor to spend more time in this cultural Landscape. Dhaba's design vocabulary is inspired from Islamic kiosks and golden fluted domes.

The extract from Student's work can be witnessed in Figure 8 which demonstrates the whole plan of Art and Craft Center proposed around the caves. It shows how through literature review, archival data helps in understanding the dynamics of abandoned sites. The gaps in the data can be covered and understood through proper connectivity of historical evidences. This data helps in developing a design language for respective sites. As we can witness how historical data helped in selecting forms for finalized building program. These forms help in reviving the original character of the site that was long lost due to abandonment of the caves.

Figure 10
Master Plan



Figure 11

Different Views of the Form Proposed on the Site



Conclusions

The proposed Art and Craft Centre demonstrates how adaptive reuse can transform the abandoned Shah Allah Ditta Caves into a living cultural destination while preserving their historical and natural significance. The design proves that integrating tangible heritage, represented by the caves and architectural forms inspired by Buddhist, Islamic, and Mughal influences, with intangible heritage through traditional crafts, workshops, exhibitions, and cultural activities can revitalize the historical origin of the site. This approach helps future generations connect with and continue traditional practices that shape cultural heritage. The proposal strengthens regional identity and promotes cultural tourism along with local artisans. The site remains an active and meaningful part of society through the respective approach of adaptive reuse rather than a preserved but inactive monument, as shown in figure 9, which is extracted from the work of a student.

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