



# PECULIARITIES OF MODERN ARCHITECTURE IN HISTORIC CITIES OF AFGHANISTAN: KABUL, HERAT AND BALKH

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**Abstract:** Afghanistan has a very diverse history. The architecture is equally diverse. This paper discusses some key features and influences of Afghan architecture taking three examples from present context. The paper talks about three mosques, each from Herat, Kabul and Balkh respectively. It then compares and analyses their ancient and modern construction, and changes made. There was not much development in the architectural form as compared with the design. The decoration and ornamentation of the structures and monuments has undergone considerable change. Hence, it is best to raise public awareness of the value of Afghanistan's cultural heritage and train and equip young architects [1][2].

**Key Term:** Stupa; Mausoleum; Mosque; Minaret

## Introduction

Afghanistan has a large collection of landmarks and monuments. These represent their past civilizations and manifest their place at the intersection of cultures. While efforts had been made for the conservation of the architectural remains and the protection of the monuments from 1922 to 1979, Afghanistan's built heritage has been physically affected by war, encroachments, public indigence and unconscious destruction or renovations.

Afghanistan includes striking architectural remains of all ages including Greek and Buddhist stupas (shrines or relics) and monasteries, arches, monuments, complicated Islamic minarets (the tall, slender mosque towers), temples and forts. Among the most famous sites are the large mosques of Herat and Mazar-e Sharif; the minaret of a mosque at Jam in the western central highlands; the 1000-year-old Great Arch of Qal'eh-ye Bost; the Chel Zina (Forty Steps) and rock inscriptions made by Mughal emperor Babur in Kandahar; the Great Buddha of Bamian (55 m/180 ft tall); the "Towers of Victory" in Ghazni; and Emperor Babur's tomb and the great Bala Hissar fort in Kabul[2][4][5].

## ***1.1 ARCHITECTURE OF AFGHANISTAN: FEATURES AND INFLUENCES***

Afghan history's diversity allows for the diversity that exists in the country's architecture and architectural remains, with influences in recent centuries ranging from Greek to Persian, to Indian, to Chinese and European. There are also reflections of a range of religious influences over time, with evidence showing primarily early Buddhist, Zoroastrian and Islamic inspirations.

With the start of the Iron Age in Central Asia the first signs of circular city planning are visible, common from this point on across the Iranian plateau. Most likely, the circular form had defenseless intent as its origin. Parts of major historic cities such as Balkh and Kandahar have evidence of ramparts with foundations dating back to this period, with characteristic mud-brick construction at regular intervals, and towers. Also commonly located within the center of these structures was a citadel, evidence that these settlements also functioned as administrative centers and market places. From these beginnings, this tradition of defensive architecture was propagated and maintained throughout much of Central Asia[5].

### ***1.1.1 The Stupa***

With the establishment of the Kushan Empire, both political and dynastic centers have been established, with one such dynastic center being identified at Surkh Kotal in Afghanistan, established at the height of Buddhism in Afghanistan. The widespread construction of the stupa, a key architectural form of the early Buddhist period, came within this time period. This structure developed from the original earthen mounds built in north-east India after Buddha's death, with the structure's role moving from a commemorative reliquary to a place of worship itself. This occurred around the 3rd century BC when Emperor Ashoka opened the original stupas to use relics to disseminate religion, coinciding with the structure itself being disseminated. From an earthen mound to solid masonry structures consisting of a square base under a hemispheric dome, a long and complex development of form came with this development of purpose. This form eventually came to be dwarfed by a mast adornment featuring seven umbrella-like disks, or chakras, each representing a different layer of heaven. These structures, with other stupas and traditional Buddhist monasteries and chapels commonly in the vicinity, were rarely isolated[1][2].

### ***1.1.2 The Mausoleum***

The mausoleum was an important Islamic structure, with the large distance between the region of Afghanistan and Mecca elevating the structures enshrining holy men to alternative focal points for the pilgrimage to the city required. At Mazar-i Sharif there exists evidence of this in the great shrine of Ali, the first Shi'a Imam, which today remains a point of great pilgrimage for the Sunni Muslim population in Afghanistan.

Typically, the shape of a mausoleum involved either a domed square chamber, or a conical cupola above a tower. An iwan, an ornamentally vaulted entrance portal, was subsequently a key feature of common later additions. The iwan originated in pre-Islamic Central Asia, and saw itself incorporated with Islamic expansion into many mausoleum and mosque designs, especially in later Timurid period architecture. It was also maintained as a prominent feature of secular architecture, with pre-Islamic evidence in the Ai Khanum palace architecture, and a later Islamic example in the Ghaznavid palace at Lashkari Bazar in the 12th century AD. Another essential form was the dome, used especially in mausoleums and mosques[5][12][13].

### ***1.1.3 The Mosque***

Another core influence of Islamic rule on Afghanistan's architecture was the introduction of the mosque's fundamental religious building, with aspects of the basic structure influenced by the religion itself. A mosque must face Mecca, or qibla, in the direction of prayer, and contain within the qibla wall a mihrab or niche for prayer. An ablution area allows for the cleanliness requirement before prayer and a clean, covered floor enables the head to be touched on the ground during prayer. With the Qur'an restricting animal portrayals or the human form, Islamic structure decoration evolved with a more intangible aspect than previous eras. Much of this decoration utilised the literal text of the Qur'an.

In the subsequent Ghaznavid and Ghorid periods, a markedly Iranian influence is notable, where tiles were arranged to form decorative inscriptions that made up entire walls, a tradition that later developed greatly in the Timurid era. In general, the mosques were based on a four-iwan plan with a central dome chamber. The oldest Islamic structure in Afghanistan is a square, nine-dome mosque at Balkh, constructed in the 9th century AD by the Abbasids[2][8][9].

### ***1.1.4 The Minaret***

The 65-meter Ghorid minaret at Jam—one of two surviving monuments from that period in Afghanistan—and the two minarets at Ghazni are often cited as the most outstanding examples of this Islamic architectural tradition. These particular minarets themselves are also evidence of the formal variety that existed in minaret erection, with the former a colossal minaret of three stories and the latter two small and star-shaped. With their height serving the purpose of marking the site of a religious structure, minarets almost always accompanied a mosque, and could exist either in connection with it or freestanding itself.

There were few monuments from the Abbasid, Saffarid, Ghaznavid, Seljuk, Ghorid, and Khwarezmian periods in Afghanistan to survive the later devastation with the coming of the Mongols, although sources of Ghaznavid, Ghorid, and Seljuk architecture remained and continued in India under the Sultans of Ghor during this time[9][10][11].

## ***2. COMPARISON OF MOSQUES FROM KABUL, HERAT AND BALKH***

### ***2.1 SHAH-E DOH SHAMSHIRA MOSQUE, KABUL***

#### **KABUL**

##### **1. Shah-e Doh Shamshira Mosque:**

Shah-Do Shamshira Mosque (the name translates to King of Two Swords Mosque) is a two-story yellow mosque located in Kabul, Afghanistan on Andarabi Road, just off the Kabul River and Shah-Do Shamshira Bridge in the city centre. This was built during Amanullah Khan's reign. It was modelled after the Istanbul Ortaköy Mosque[5].

The mosque is located next to the tomb of Chin Timur Khan, a Mughal general, who was also the cousin of Central Asian conqueror Babur. Chin Timur helped to conquer much of India, and is famous for the Khanwa Battle, in which he played a leading role. The graves of Babur and many other prominent Muslim commanders who invaded India from Afghanistan and established Muslim rule over northern India (including modern Pakistan and Bangladesh) are not far from here.

A pilgrimage to the Shah-e Doh Shamshira Mosque of the same name is built in one of the central parts of Kabul city within seven metres, between them, a public separation road that opens the way for Kabul's citizens to the historic Poly Khashti Mosque[3].



**Fig.1.** Shah-E-Doh Shamshira Mosque, Kabul

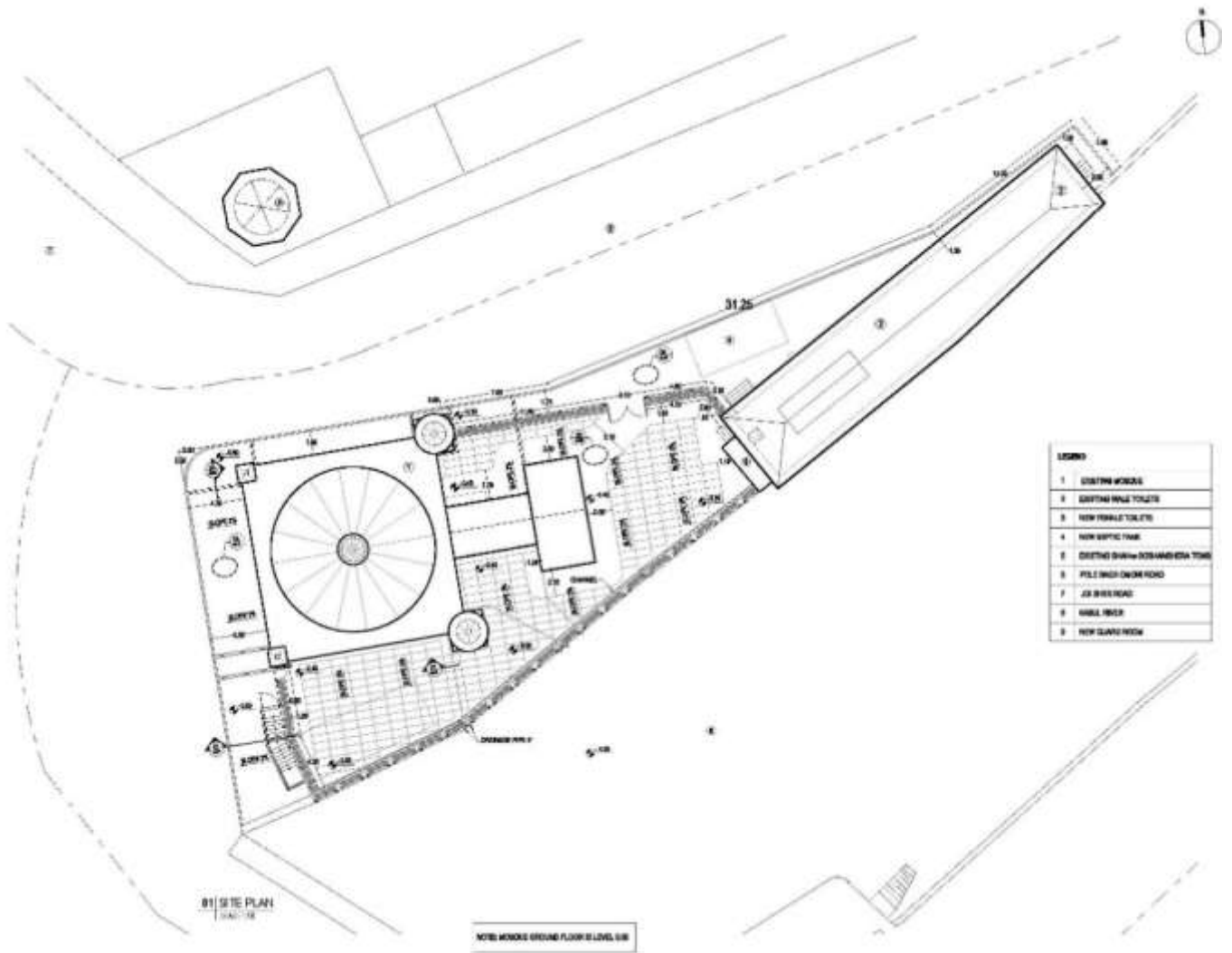
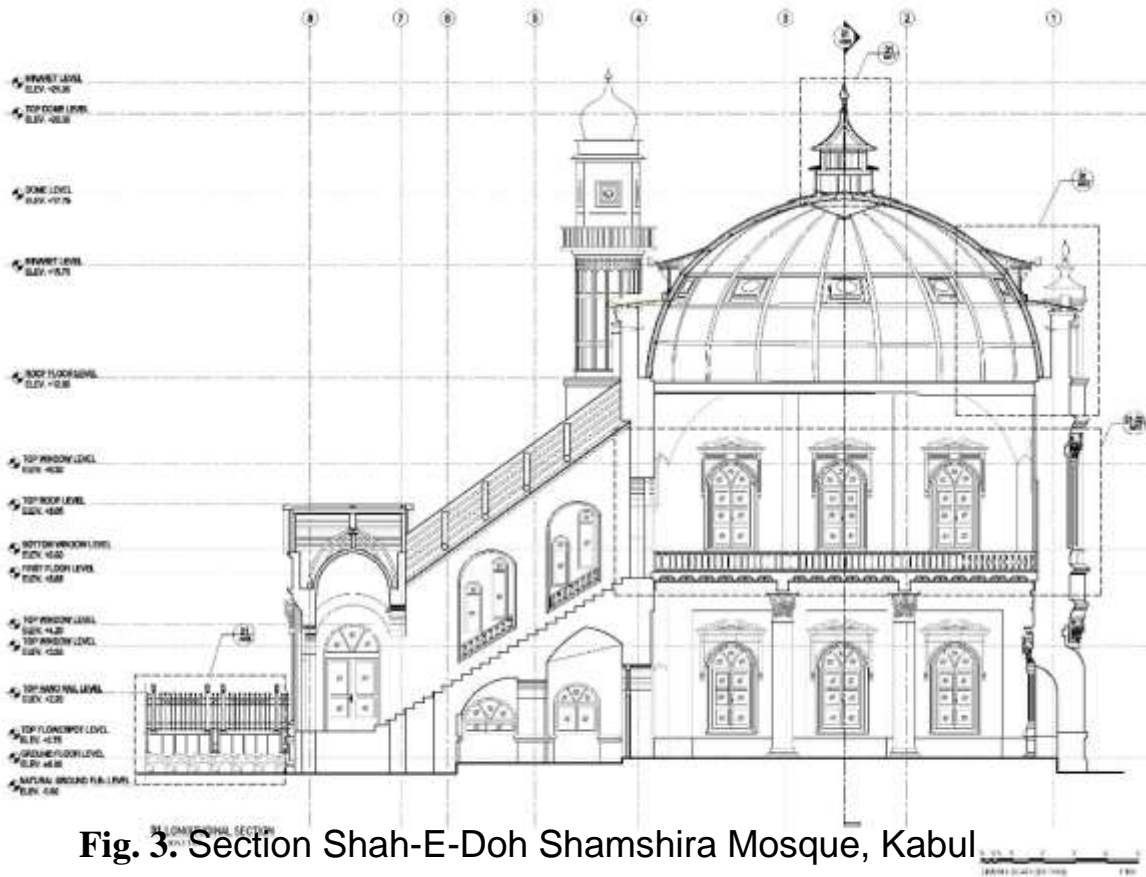


Fig.2. Ground Floor Shah-E-Doh Shamshira Mosque, Kabul



**Fig. 3.** Section Shah-E-Doh Shamshira Mosque, Kabul

The yellow mosque remains historic among the ruins of Kabul, with its roof decorated with specially decorated wood and not to be found in many newly constructed buildings in the country[5]. There are two shrines and within the shrine next to the mosque which are said to be one of them, Laith bin Qais bin Abbas, uncle of the Prophet of Islam, and the other Abdul Rahman bin Asha'ah, a man who feared Ibn Yusuf's pilgrimage. He fled and belongs to Kabul. In the name of the King of the Two Kings, the main reason for calling this Shah-e Doh Shamshira was when Laith bin Qais entered the war in Kabul with two swords in his hand, which is why it was named after the Shah-e Doh Shamshira. [5][8][13].

## HERT

### 2.2 JAMI MASJID, HERT

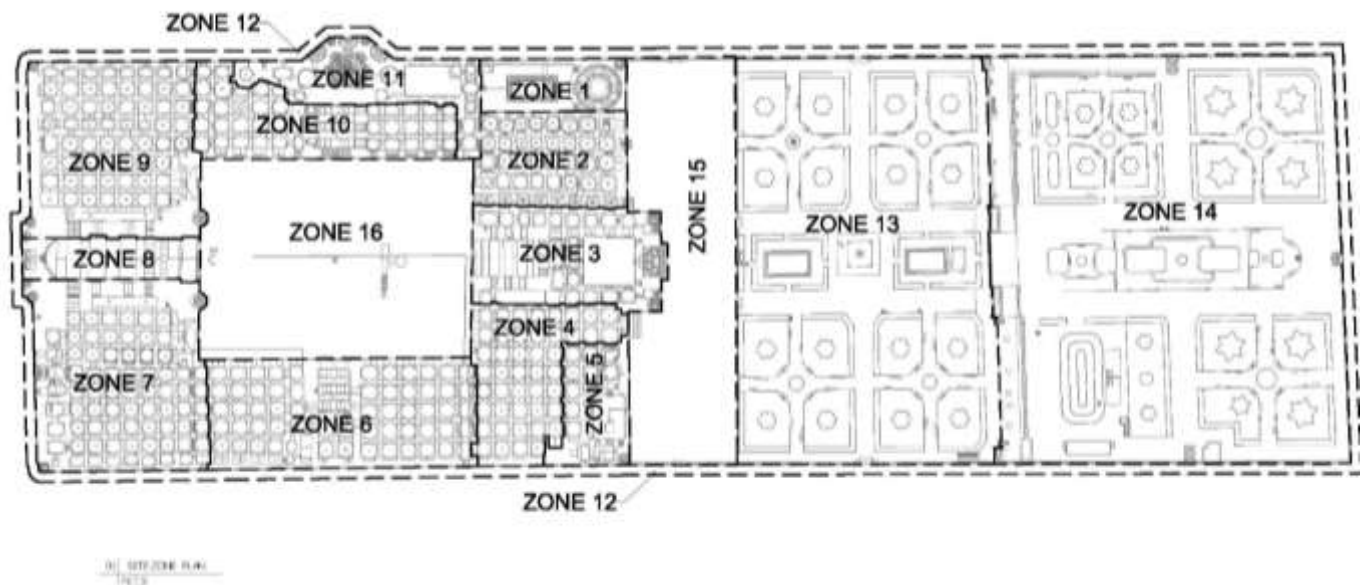
Herat's Great Mosque, or "Herat's Jami Masjid," is a mosque in Herat district, in northwestern Afghanistan's Herat province. It was built by the Ghurids under the rule of Sultan Ghiyath al-Din Muhammad Ghorī, who laid down its foundation in 1200 CE, and later extended by several rulers as Herat changed rulers from the Timurids to the Safavids, Mughals and then the Uzbeks, all of whom supported the mosque throughout the centuries. Although many of the glazed tiles were removed in subsequent times, during the closing years of the fifteenth century the Friday Mosque at Herat was given its present form.

Herat Grand Mosque The world's fifth largest mosque is more than 1,400 years old and covers an area of 46,764 square metres, with 460 domes, 130 porches, 444 elephants, twelve pots, four porches, four wide domes. Four gates, four large inscriptions adorned with verses, mystical mystics and great poets, three shrines, a stone pulpit, a library and a vigil which are situated in the most beautiful place of the ancient town of Herat and at one time accommodated more than one hundred thousand worshippers. The pots from the mosque, which were designed to transmit azan's sound to people's ears, ranged from 17 to 36 meters high, 7 to 10 meters in diameter. Each of the

eight porches had Turquoise tiles painted on the roofs. In the year 597 this great temple became a mosque for Muslims after the conversion of the people of Herat to Islam. Anyone seeing the mosque for the first time will be shocked by the mosque's magnificence and architecture. Even for Herat's eyes the colorful paintings and mosaics of the seven-colored porches and tiled carvings are interesting



Fig.4. Jami Masjid, Herat



**Fig.5.** Ground Floor Jami Masjid, Herat**Fig.6.** Section Jami Masjid, Herat

This pre-Islamic mosque also existed in the form of a temple. Before Islam, the Great Herat Mosque existed in the same building area which dates back to three thousand years ago. Most of Islamic world's great figures taught there, including Khwaja Abdullah Ansari and Khwaja Mohammedaki.

Historically Herat Mosque has had many ups and downs. It was demolished several times, and reconstructed or restored. Half of the mosque, often covered with wood and painted, was burnt down in the year 992, but rebuilt by Khwaja Muhammad Taki's efforts and the cooperation of the people. [5][7][11][12].

## BALKH

### 2.3 SHRINE OF HAZRAT ALI, BALKH

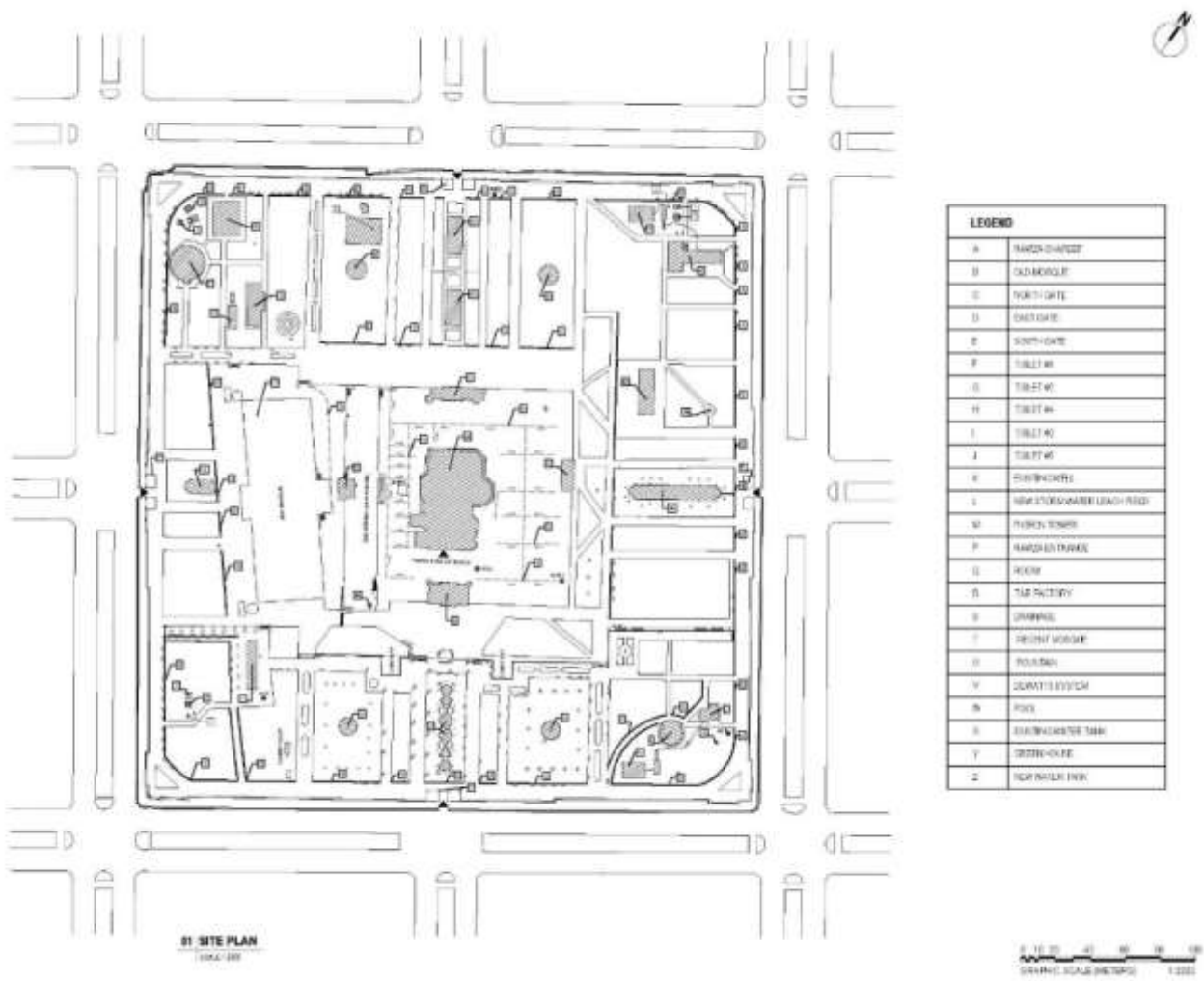
The Blue Mosque is a mosque located in Mazar-i-Sharif city centre, Afghanistan. Sultan Ahmed Sanjar, of the Seljuq dynasty, built the first known shrine at this site. During the Genghis Khan invasion around 1220 it was destroyed or hidden under an earthen embankment. In the 15th century the current Blue Mosque was built here by Sultan Husayn Bayqarah Mirza. It is by far the most important landmark in Mazar-i-Sharif and the town's name (Noble Shrine, Grave of Hazrat-i-Ali {Sharif}) is believed to originate from this shrine[5][6][7][12].

A site plan of the location made in the 1910s shows that a smaller walled precinct had previously existed in the mosque, which was later razed to create parks, although the portals to this precinct still remain as gateways to the shrine. Tombs of varying dimensions have been added over the years for a number of Afghan political and religious leaders, which has led to the development of its currency. These include Amir Dost Muhammad's square domed tomb, Wazir Akbar Khan and an analogous structure for Amir Sher Ali and his family.

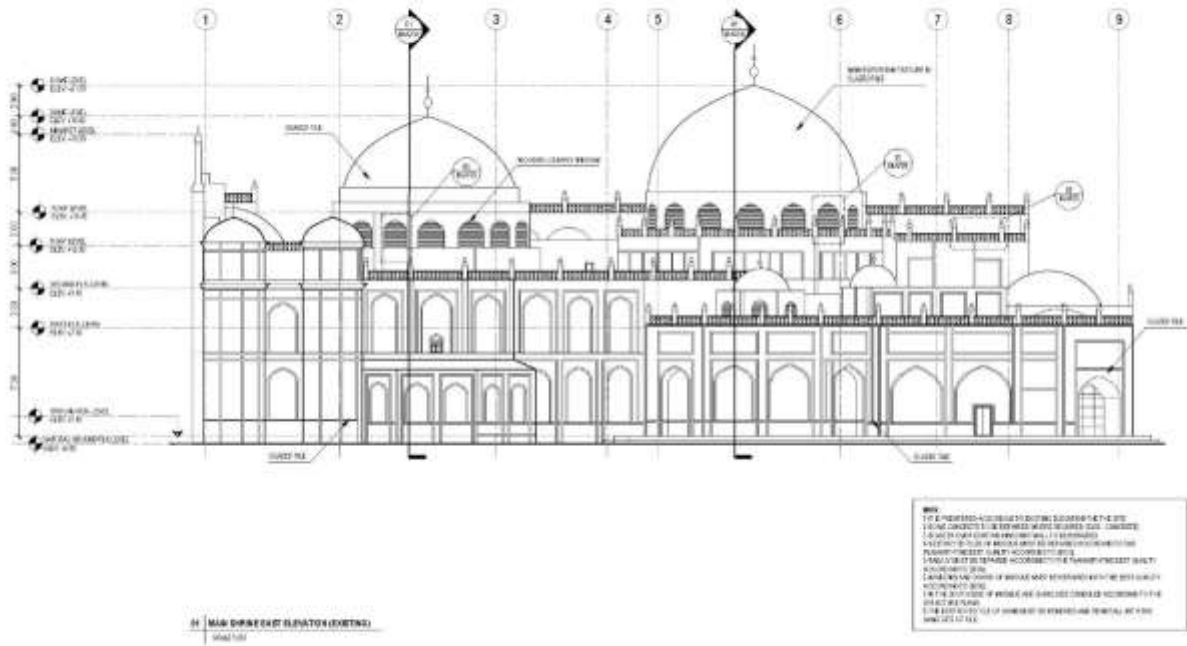




**Fig.7.** Shrine OF Hazrat Ali Balkh



**Fig.8.** Ground Floor Shrine OF Hazrat Ali Balkh



**Fig.9.** Section Shrine OF Hazrat Ali Balkh

Ali, reportedly brought here by a white camel to save his remains from the desecration by his enemies, has been buried here according to a local legend. Nevertheless, most Muslims believe that Ali is buried in the mosque of Imam Ali, and Najaf in Iraq.

Additionally, Islam may have been predated by the individual buried in the Shrine. Identifying the shrine with Ali will possibly be a misconception to ensure the Islamic government would preserve and respect the tomb [5][6][7]

**2.4 ANALYTICAL FINDING**

	Shah-e Doh Shamshira Mosque, Kabul	Jami Mosque, Herat	Shrine of Hazrat Ali, Balkh
<b>Year/Style of Construction</b>	1929/ Italianate baroque	1446/Islamic	1481/Islamic
<b>Old Features</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Crossed dome</li> <li>• Stucco finish</li> <li>• Nave-like structure</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rectangular iwan pattern</li> <li>• Central courtyard</li> <li>• Charbagh</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Persian style tile work</li> <li>• Pigeon tower/minaret</li> </ul>
<b>Stages in New Construction</b>	Phase I: Survey and Elementary Studies Phase II: Design Phase Three: Project Implementation Stage	Phase I: Survey and Elementary Studies Phase II: Design Phase Three: Project Implementation Stage	Phase I: Survey and Elementary Studies Phase II: Design Phase Three: Project Implementation Stage

<p><b>Modified Features</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• New female toilets were added</li> <li>• Drainage system was improvised</li> <li>• Guard room was added</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Added 20m to the north-eastern section</li> <li>• Old expensive materials were replaced with locally available cheap materials</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Twin arches retouched</li> <li>• A new water tank was constructed</li> <li>• Drainage system was improvised</li> </ul>
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## CONCLUSION:

There was not much development in the architectural form as compared with the design. The decoration and ornamentation of the structures and monuments has undergone considerable change. Colors started with turquoise, white and royal blue, followed by a myriad of shades and pigments, arranged into complicated, intertwined geometric girikhs or knots. The decor featured included floral motifs, mountain and cloud depictions and Chinese-inspired ornamentation.

Planning and regulatory bodies do not appear to have an adequate legal framework; nor are there adequate historical property records, nor comprehensive planning regulations and building codes. The conservation policy of the government is weak and the law on the protection of archeological artifacts does not clearly protect monuments, particularly those located away from the authorities and experts' eyes. Lack of executive coordination, and a lack of funds and expertise also add to the challenges. It is most important to protect the cultural heritage built up in Afghanistan.

The community's direct involvement—people, education, and cultural institutions—in works of protection and conservation needs to be strengthened in development programs. It must be acknowledged that for our restoration as a nation and for our future, our historically built heritage has significance. Work and publication will start on vernacular architecture and the conservation. It is best to raise public awareness of the value of our cultural heritage by educating young architects and building archaeologists through organized training both at universities and at project sites.

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