BAMIYAN CULTURAL CENTRE

24,000 SF museum and cultural center
Bamiyan Valley, Afghanistan
competition entry, 2015

VIEW FROM NORTH
In 2015, UNESCO and the Afghan Ministry of Information and Culture announced their mission to build the Bamiyan Cultural Centre. Situated on a plateau, overlooking the World Heritage site and archaeological remains of the ancient Buddha cliffs, the purpose of the center is to provide ‘heritage safe-guarding and cross-cultural awareness’.

Our proposal for the Bamiyan Cultural Centre competition takes the shape of an earthen block, formed from the land it sits upon, and defined by its’ pakhsa (rammed earth) wall. It is perforated with light and adorned with traditional glazed Afghan tiles. Parallel to the great Buddha cliffs, the orientation maximizes views of the valley and surrounding mountains. The center is intended to have a prominent presence in the Bamiyan Valley, integrated with the local architecture. We see this design as the first step in building a larger cultural infrastructure, celebrating heritage and engaging community. Approaching the entrance from a gently sloping ramp, the exterior form of the building frames views of the Buddha cliffs beyond. Inside the main block, perforations in the pakhsa envelope blur the experience of interior and exterior. On the entry level, gallery spaces protect the artifacts of a diverse culture. The circulation path through the gallery is flexible, to respond to changing needs of program. The gallery spaces are shielded from harsh direct sun, with natural light diffused into the space from the clerestory above. At the end of the gallery progression, the building opens to views of the valley and cliffs beyond.

At the eastern end of the building, a grand stair descends to the lower level, where a public corridor connects researchers, performers and students, fostering a lively exploration of cultural tradition for generations to come. This corridor serves as an internal road and provides views to the valley. Facing the valley is a large landscaped stair that serves as an outdoor amphitheater. At the end of this internal road, the visitor will find a traditional Afghan tea house, which connects to a large exterior patio and the formal gardens beyond.
A half-meter rammed earth pakhsa envelope surrounds a concrete modular frame. The traditional paksha material creates a thermal mass that insulates the interior and regulates temperature. A pattern of circular indentations is pressed into the earth as it is formed, creating texture that allows for multiple functions. These indentations can be perforations or windows that allow for air flow and interior daylighting. They can also be filled with a paillette or left empty. The form created by the paksha wall is consistent with the vernacular construction found throughout the valley.

The building appears as a long rectangular volume that serves the public on two levels. A gallery (the cultural sanctuary) is located on the first level, while classrooms and performance areas (the cultural incubator) are located on the lower level. The interior of the volume is expressed as a modular concrete frame wrapped with a protective pakhsa envelope. The theatre and outdoor sculpture garden are located adjacent to the main volume. The main corridor below connects these spaces with the amphitheatre steps and formal garden.

The construction of the Bamiyan Cultural Centre will engage local laborers and craftsmen. The material palette was chosen for its local sourcing, resource efficiency and traditional use.

The Centre will be a net-zero energy building. Heating will be provided through the use of radiant slabs. The thermal energy for the heating will be provided by a geothermal ground source heat pump system. The building utilizes concrete and pakhsa walls specifically for their thermal mass properties. The building will be heated throughout the day when solar power is available for the system.

A paillette is a small shiny material used as decoration. The paillettes for the building will be 30cm diameter glazed tiles. Over 1,000 paillettes will begin to decorate the façade. As architectural elements, the paillettes cause the exterior appearance to fluctuate. Not only will the tiles reflect and refract light differently throughout the day, but the ability to add more over time allows the perception of the building to constantly evolve.