

REVIVING THE LOST ART OF MUSLIN

A Muslin Artisans Community

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A thesis submitted to the Department of Architecture in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Architecture

Department of Architecture
Brac University
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Declaration

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2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material that has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
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Abstract

Muslin, once the most spectacular fabric in the world, is now being revived to restore a piece of intangible cultural heritage and the national pride of a nation. Muslin of uncommonly delicate handspun yarn was handwoven in the Bengal region of South Asia and imported into Europe for much of the 17th and early 18th centuries. Dhaka muslin is an ultra-fine, ultra-soft fabric made from a potentially extinct species of fabric called 'phuti carpas', grown only along one stretch of the Meghna River.

Unfortunately, during the British colonization, pressure from the East India Company and the rise of machine-made mass-product 'muslin' rolled off the newly invented power looms- slowly causing the fall of original muslin production. Soon after that, the rare cotton phuti carpas went extinct. The muslin trade at one time helped turn the Ganges delta and what is now Bangladesh into one of the most prosperous parts of the world, historians say.

Now almost a decade later, the quest for reviving muslin is being initiated by Drik Gallery and the Bangladeshi government. The government initiative is a great boost for researchers who are working hard on finding the extinct phuti carpas which were only available along a small stretch of the Meghna River. Through extensive research and trials, it has been possible to find the raw material of muslin, Phuti Carpus, and cultivation of the plant. With the help of the Dhaka handloom board, a project has been proposed at Narayanganj, where an integrated community would be built that would benefit the muslin weavers as well as house weaving stations that would kickstart the commercial production of muslin cloth. This study focuses on learning about the lifestyle of muslin weavers and its rich history, as well as creating an integrated center that would be a part of the surrounding neighborhood. Furthermore, This paper discusses the proposal to design a platform for the weavers' community which would bring back hope in restoring the golden heritage of Bengal, and restore the worldwide recognition that it originally had so many years ago.

Keywords: Weavers, muslin, research, housing, exhibition

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Firstly, I would like to thank Almighty Allah for giving me the strength and perseverance to keep me strong and determined throughout these last few years, especially during my thesis. My parents, to whom I could never convey the gratitude that I feel for being my pillars, my supporters through every hardship, and for giving me every opportunity to fulfill my dreams. My cousin, Mehel, who always cheered me up and was my best friend and sister at any time I needed.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the project

The story of muslin fabrics- forever imprinted onto our history books- has been loved and adored by many worldwide and is still an integral part of Bengal's heritage. Once the most valuable fabric on earth, Dhaka muslin has now become almost extinct. The revival journey of the Muslin launched a few years ago in 2018, an initiative taken by the government and the creative organization Drik, led by Saiful Islam.

As the production of muslin clothes requires a specific microclimate with high humidity and moisture of land, not to mention expert craftsmanship, it has suffered a massive decline- but is now being painstakingly resurrected...a fabric once worn by Mughal emperors.

1.2 Project Brief

Name of the project: Reviving the Lost Art of Muslin: *A Muslin Artisan's Community*

Client: Ministry of Textiles and Jute

Site location: Juto fiberglass industry area, Tarabo, Rupganj, Naryanganj

Site area: 5.6 acres

1.3 Project rationale:

This project aims to create a platform for muslin weavers and artisans to promote their craft and spread the art of weaving muslin across generations, as well as an attempt to bring back the golden tradition and house the industrial production of this long-lost fabric. The objective is to exhibit and showcase the beauty of the fabric and spread awareness about the stories and cultures of Bengal muslin. Alongside that, creating an integrated community space where artisans and the public can interact and merge as one, would be a great opportunity for artisans to gain exposure from tourists and simultaneously improve the economic condition of the neighborhood.

Through extensive research, it has been possible to find the raw material of muslin, Phuti Carpus, cultivation of the plant, and yarn production. Muslin cotton yarns were handspun and had sixteen elaborate processes. According to Rahman (2023) at the height of its fame, a yard of fable fabric in Dhaka once could fetch prices ranging from £50 to £400, equivalent to roughly £7,000 to £56,000 today, with even the best silk costing 26 times less. Part of the reason why the muslin fabric did not survive the test of time was that the cloth was only worn by the members of the elite- the ultra-rich, as the effort required to produce the cloth was immense. However, one of the core ideas of the project was to ensure the accessibility of the fabric by all members of society, as due to the advancements of technology increases over time it is vital that people use muslin- and adorned by many all over the world in order to survive.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Revival story

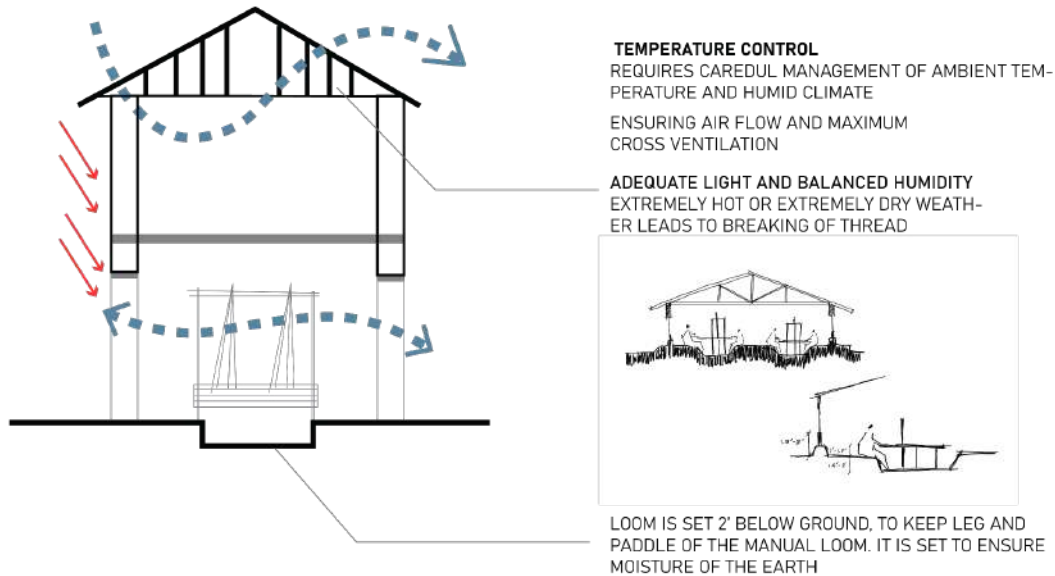
Almost a decade later, the revival journey of muslin cloth was undertaken with the help of Drik Gallery, an expert team of researchers under their care, and the Bangladesh government. Though the whole process of muslin weaving is shrouded in obscurity, during a visit to the Textile and Jute Ministry in 2014, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina instructed on reviving muslin and has also allocated a Tk 13 core fund to reinstate our lost glory, as stated by Khan (2020). The government initiative was a great boost for researchers who were working hard on finding the extinct phuti karpas which were only available along a small stretch of the Meghna River. At Rajshahi University, a team of researchers has been deployed to restore and reinvent the phuti karpas. Saiful Islam, a partner at Drik Gallery, runs Bengal Muslin, a heritage crafting enterprise seeking to adapt ancient techniques and revive the phuti carpas plant. After a long journey of tests and trials, Saiful, along with his team of researchers had to sequence the DNA of a plant from a single pressed specimen from the 19th century, kept at the Royal Botanic Gardens. They eventually managed to find a plant that had about 3 quarters of the same genetic code as phuti carpas (Corbley, 2021). According to Arif (2021), The information about this exotic cotton tree came from Kapasia of Gazipur and Rangamati in March 2017 through various propaganda sources. Then a total of 38 samples were collected from Baghaichhari, Sajek, and Langdu of Rangamati, Bagerhat, Lalmonirhat, and Kurigram, and the experimenters found a match between the cotton plant species in Kapasia and the sketch they had with them. This variety of potential Phuty carpas cotton plants was cultivated in the fields of the Botany Department of Rajshahi University and of the Institute of Biological Science.

The next challenge was to find a skilled enough weaver to weave the fine cotton cloth that is muslin, and as time went by, the downfall of muslin also meant the craft had gone extinct- the art of weaving this fine thread cloth had not been passed onto generations. They did eventually find a weaver of traditional Jamdani muslin, and together they were able to create a Dhaka muslin cloth with a thread count of about 300 fibers per square inch stated by Corbley (2021). Eventually, two muslin sarees of 300-count thread newly made by talented artisans were exhibited in the National Museum in 2016. As stated by Rahman (2023) the government's muslin revival project turned to textile engineers who would work with spinners, mostly from the Cumilla region. The khadi, along with the jamdani, were two relatives of muslin. Spinners acquainted with either of the fabrics would thus be the perfect choice to work on muslin.

The proposed project, the Dhakai Muslin House, located in Narayanganj, would employ 400 people, including 300 spinners, 45 weavers, and 55 other staff. Among the 400 workers, 350 would be women.

2.2 Muslin artisans and architecture

REQUISITES OF WEAVING AND ARCHITECTURE



The Industrial production of muslin requires many considerations regarding climatic conditions, environment, lifestyle, and architectural characteristics. There are several requisites of weaving that have shaped this architecture.

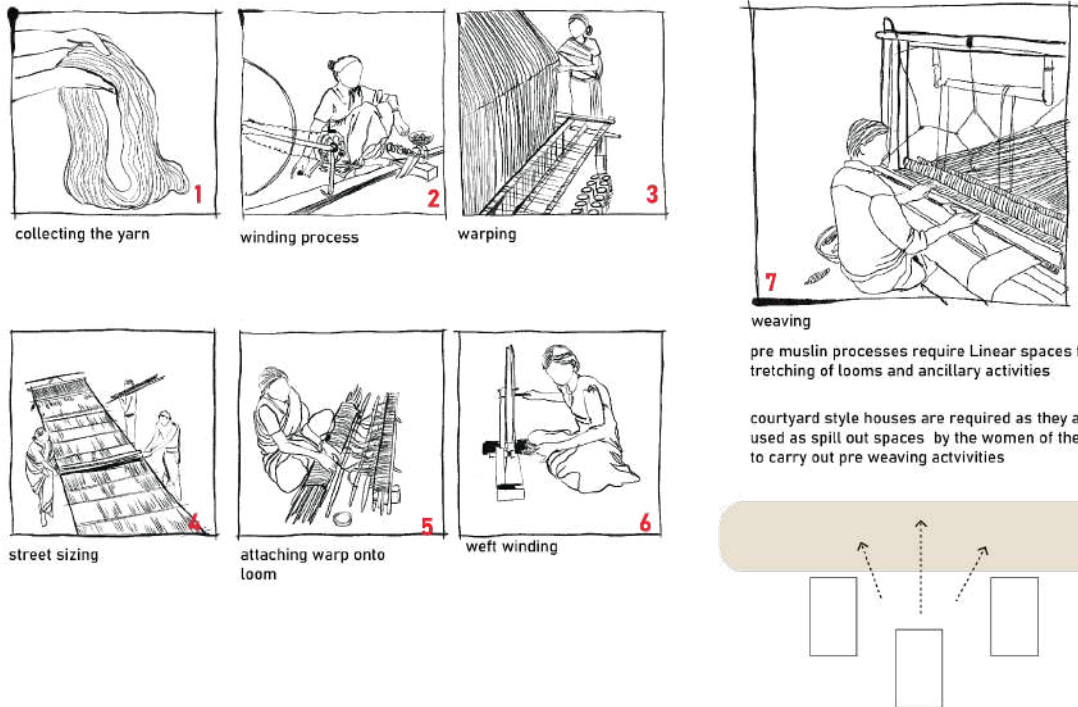
1. Weaving silk and fine cotton requires careful management of **ambient temperature and humidity levels** inside the weaving unit. The extremely hot and dry weather in summer leads to the breakage of thread, as muslin is an extremely delicate material.
A number of features help to regulate the temperature, such as the height and width of the units, the shape and sizes of the doors and windows, and access to open spaces and adjacent courtyards for ancillary tasks. Alongside that, weaving spaces are required to be in **close proximity to a water source**.
2. Weaving units are required to be designed in such a way as to ensure regular **natural cross ventilation**, through the use of high windows and roof design.
3. To ensure **abundant access to sunlight**, large openings of doors and windows are placed opposite each other on both the longitudinal sides of the room. This not only allows maximum light to fall on the loom, making it easier for the weavers to weave intricate patterns but also channelizes air flow through cross ventilation.
4. **Linear spaces** for stretching of looms and pre-weaving activities are required. The living and work spaces are arranged in linear sections. Traditional homes are built in longitudinal sections, which enable the stretching of looms as the weaving progresses. A linear layout of the streets and lanes outside is also important, for a number of pre-weaving activities, such as the stretching of yarn for rolling onto

the warp beams, which are done outdoors in the shared public spaces adjacent to the home/weaving stations.

- The loom itself is set almost 2' below the ground, in order to provide leg space and set the paddle of the loom for the weaver to sit comfortably- as well as setting the loom close to earth to absorb maximum moisture from the ground that is required for fine thread weaving.

2.3 Processes of Muslin

PROCESSES OF MUSLIN



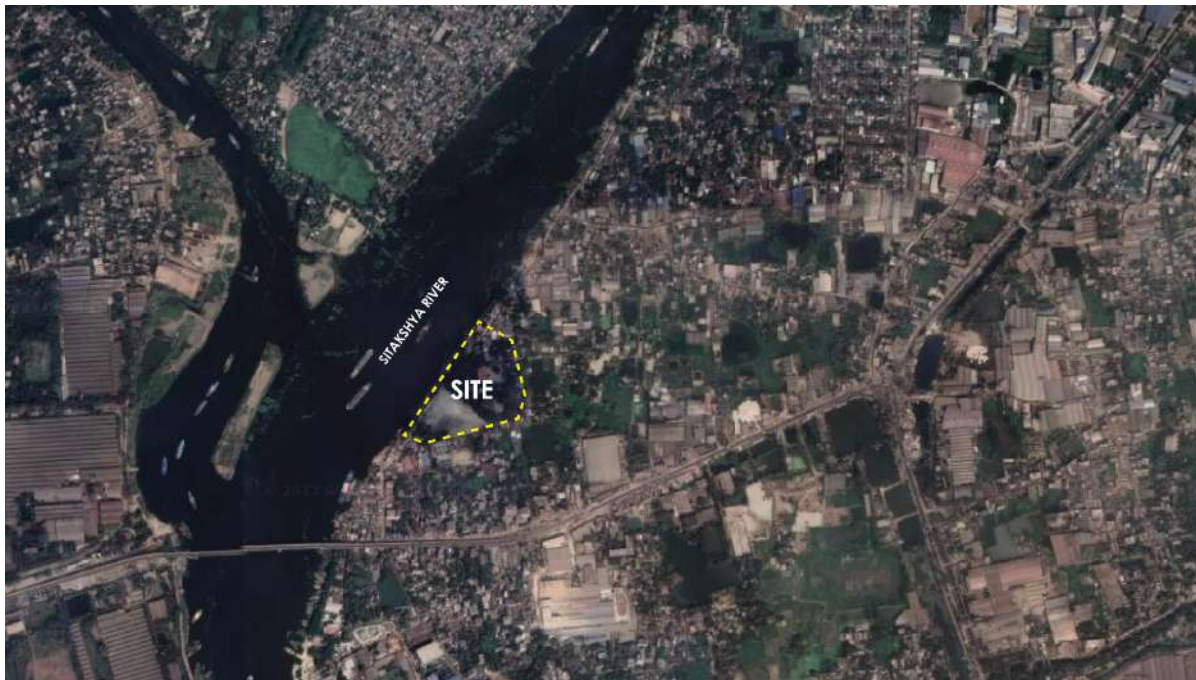
Processes of muslin illustration (source: author)

CHAPTER 3: SITE APPRAISAL AND CONTEXT ANALYSIS

3.1 Site location

The site is in Tarabo municipality, in Rupganj upazila in Narayanganj district. It is located 14km away from Dhaka. The site is accessed through the Tarabo Demraghat highway and is located at a 4-minute distance from Demra Purana ferry ghat, down from Sultana Kamal Bridge. The site is located in Juto fiberglass playground and is adjacent to the Sitalakhya river.

The area of the site is around 5.6 acres which is approximately 2,43,936 square feet.



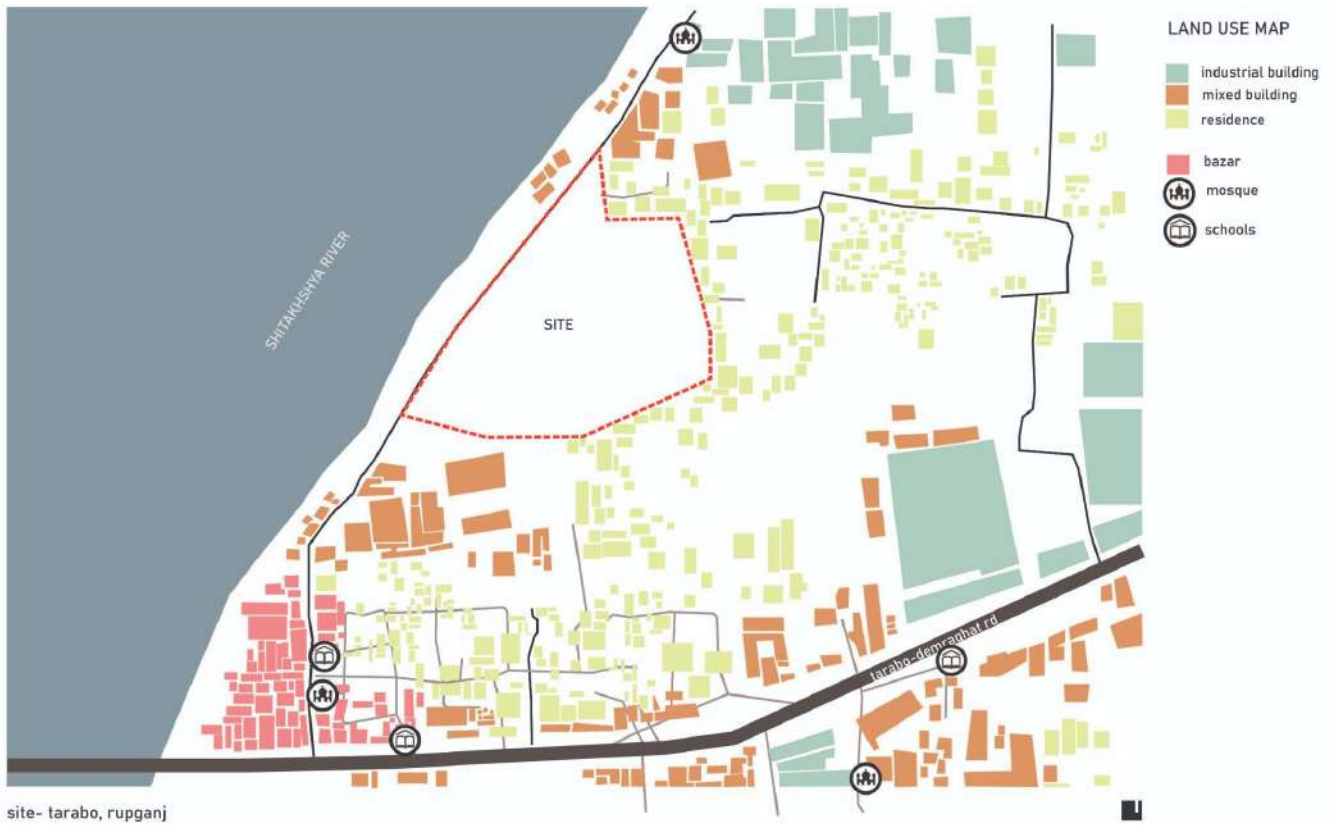
Satellite view of the site (source: Google Earth)

This site was specifically chosen as the production of muslin requires a microclimate with a combination of high humidity and moisture of land. As the Sitalakhya river is adjacent to the site the site is already conditioned to achieve the particular climate.

3.2 Adjacent land use

The existing land is currently vacant and is mostly used by children from the surrounding residential communities as a playground. Currently, dhakai muslin house is located on the north of the site.

The adjacent perimeter of the site consists of mostly low-cost residential communities. The buildings alongside the tarabo demraghat road are lined with mixed buildings, and towards the north of the site, several industrial buildings, especially textile mills, are located.

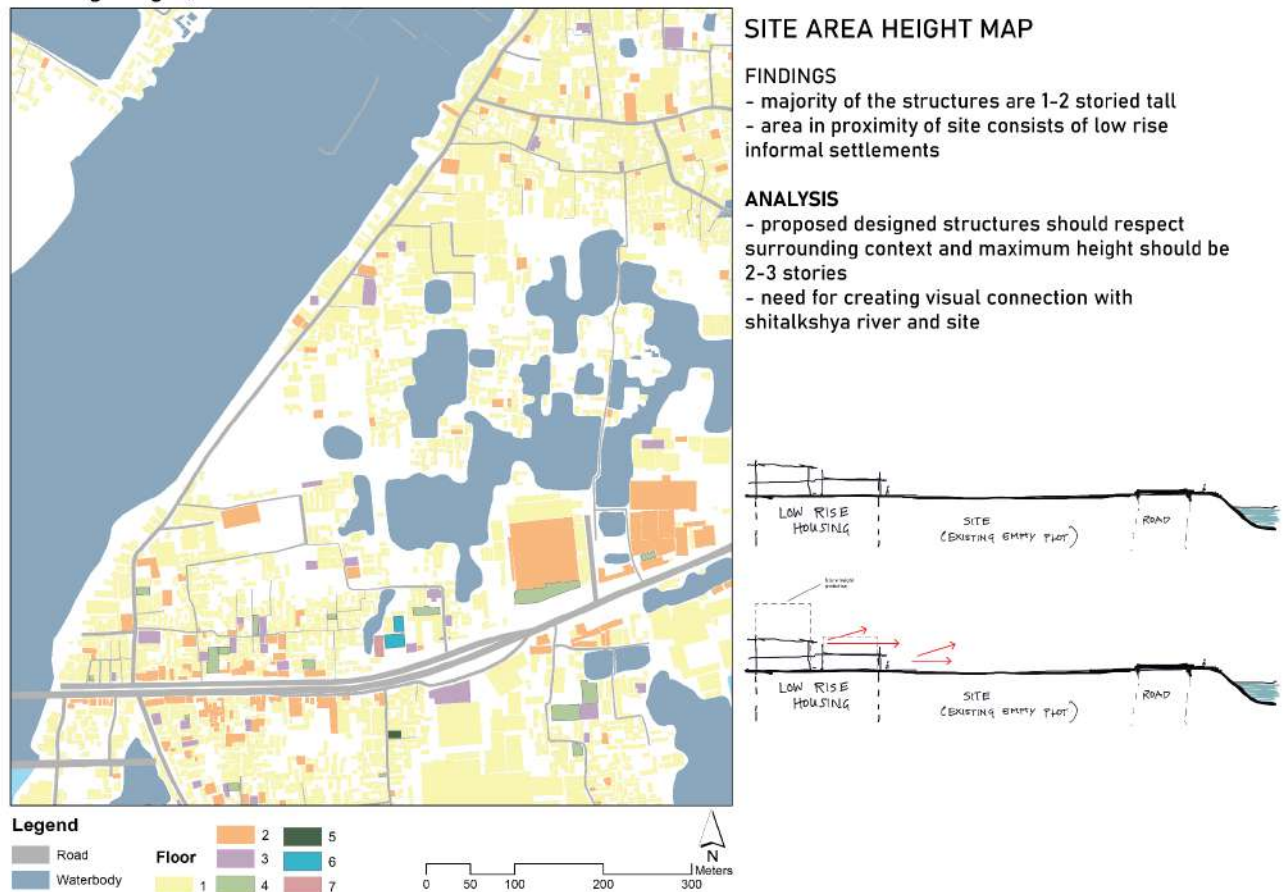


3.3 Road network



The site is accessible via a main road located through the perimeter of the land area alongside the Sitalakshya river banks on the west. Due to the recent proposal of this project, the access road had been developed in order for easy accessibility of tourists and the surrounding neighborhood.

3.4 Architectural analysis



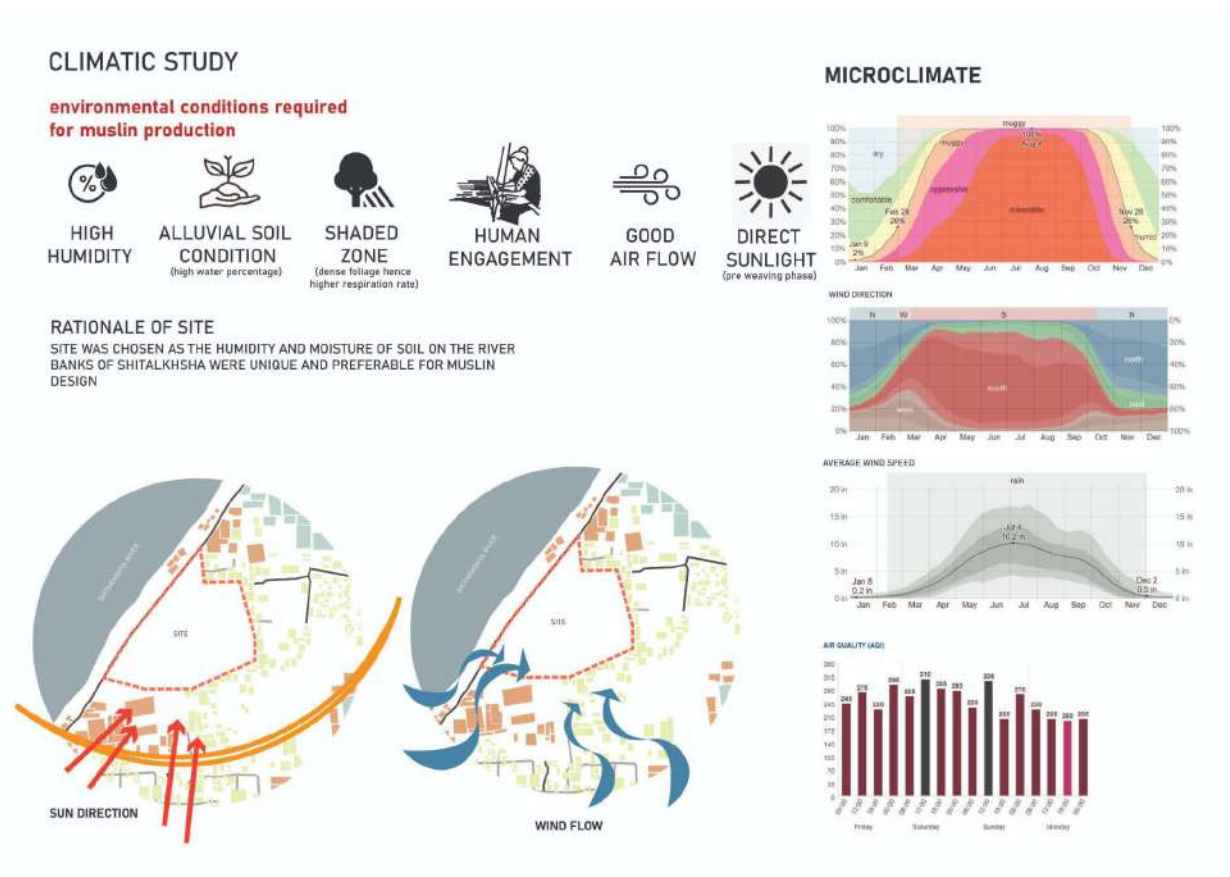
Findings-

The majority of the structures are 1-2 storied residential homes, and the structures surrounding the site consist of low-rise informal settlements.

Analysis-

- The proposed designed structures should respect the surrounding context and the maximum height should be limited to 2-3 stories
- There is a need to create a visual connection with the Sitalakshya River on the west of the site

3.5 Climatic study



The site at Rupganj, Naryanganj was chosen due to the specific humidity and moisture of soil on the river banks of the Sitalakshya River. Alluvial soil condition is required as it contains a higher water percentage which adds to the humid climate.

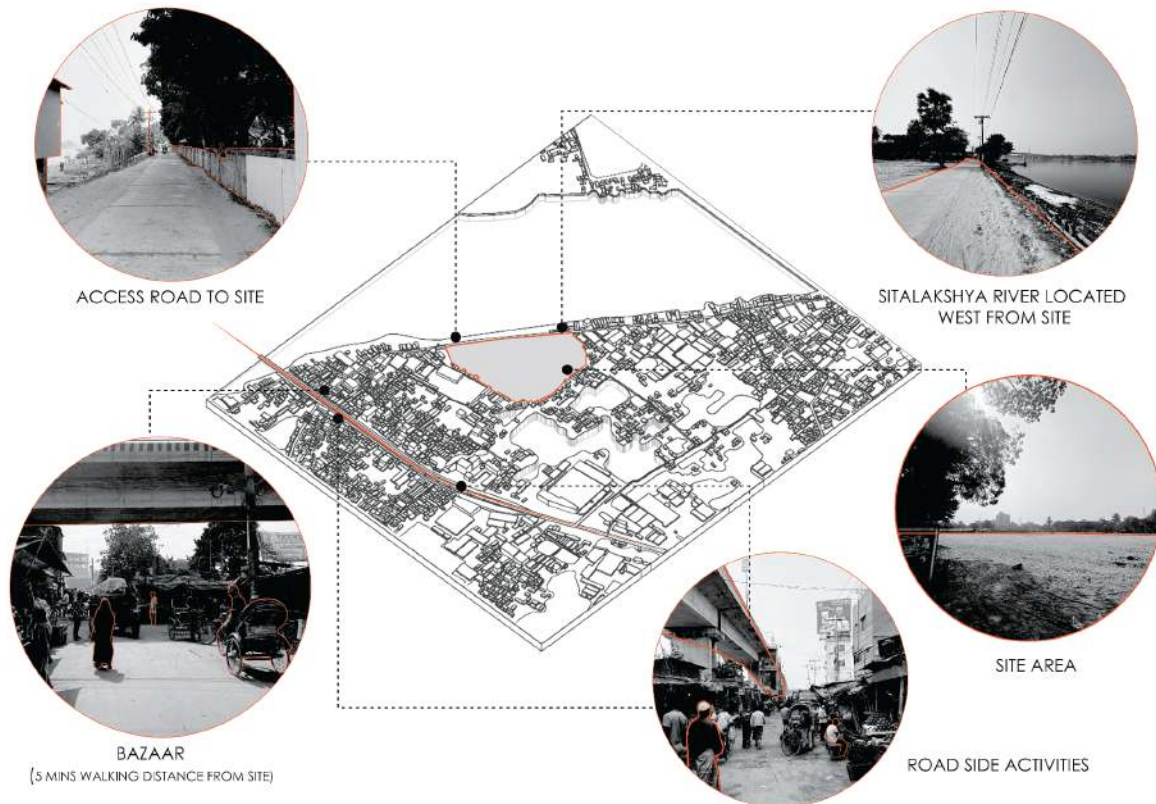
Photos of site



View of the site from the access road



Overall view of the site



Site surroundings (source: author)

CHAPTER 4: CASE STUDY

As there were no existing projects that were precisely similar to this- specializing in the commercial production of muslin fabric- in this chapter different aspects of the project will be briefly analyzed with a number of international projects.

4.1 Ganga Maki Textile Studio

This project is situated in Bhogpur, which is 30 km from Dehradun, a city in India, and was designed by **Studio Mumbai** architects. It is an innovative combination of traditional craft and local materials. Regarding the concept, Ganga Maki Textile Studio depends on a close relationship with the sun and the moon because it uses the existing agricultural terraces to cultivate indigo.

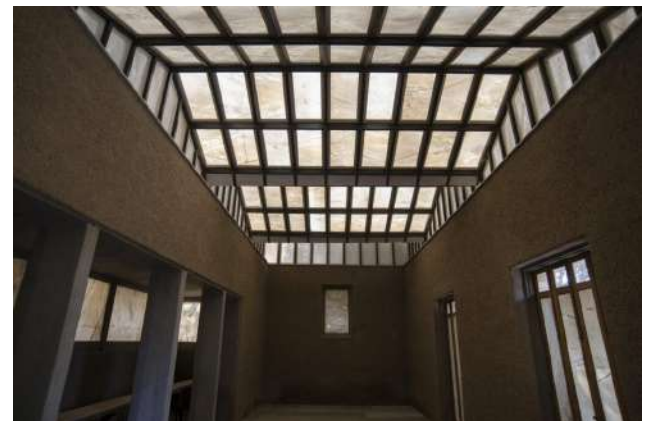
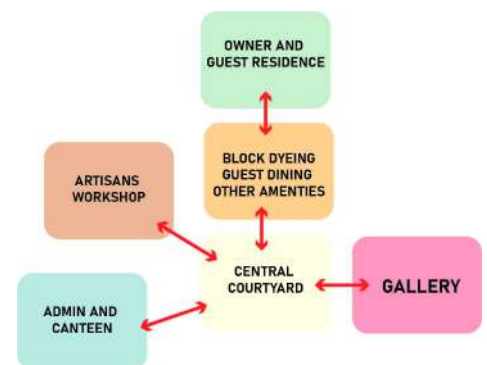


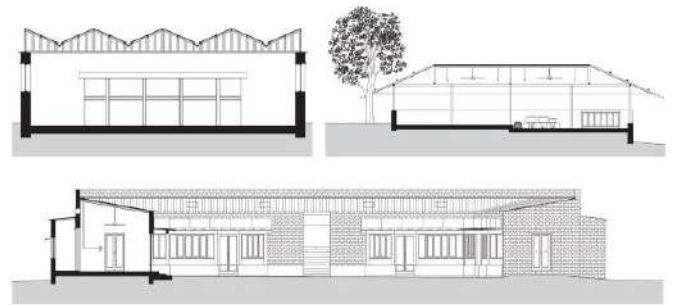
Satellite view of the site (Source- Google Maps)

The site is situated on open land on a hill with thick vegetation, with the dwelling units of the workers located in the proximity of the site. Built with the assistance of the resident community, the beautifully crafted architecture does not overpower the landscape and yet stands expressively distinct in the context.

4.1.1 Functional analysis

PROGRAM	AREA (SQM)	NO. OF USERS
Gallery	80	20
Weavers workshop	400	30
Canteen	50	15
Residential facilities	200	10
Chaakis workshop	100	1
washing and dyeing block	300	—

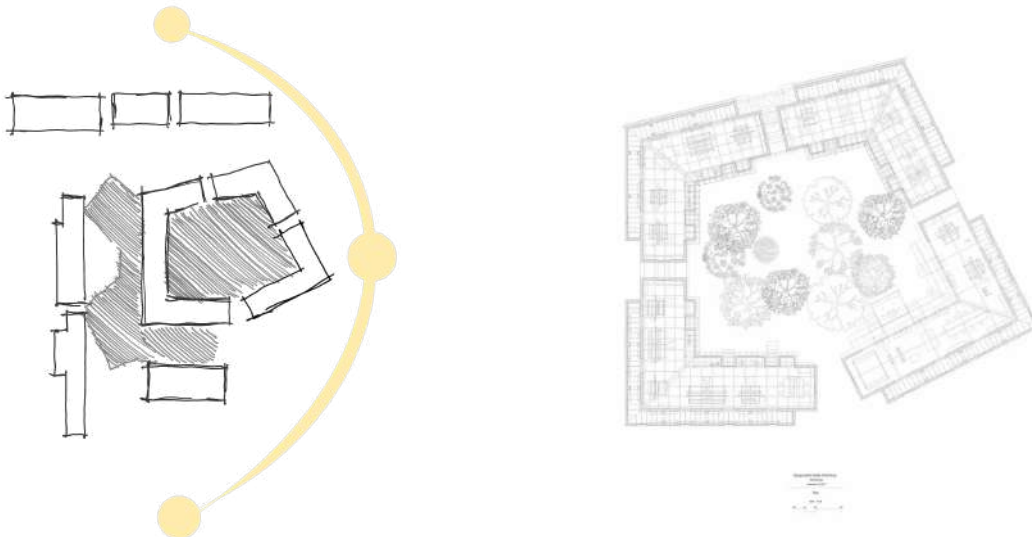




The majority of the space is allocated for the weaver's workshops and the chaaki (designer) studio. The residential block is used by guests visiting the center, along with housing for the designer and their family. A large portion of the total built area is used for washing and dyeing- as the cultivation of indigo requires long open space during pre weaving phase.

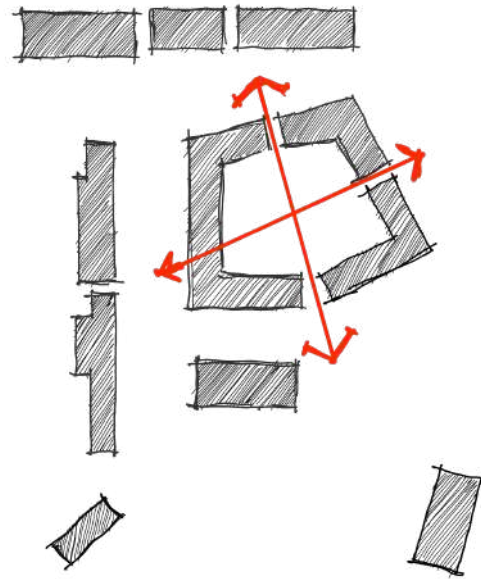
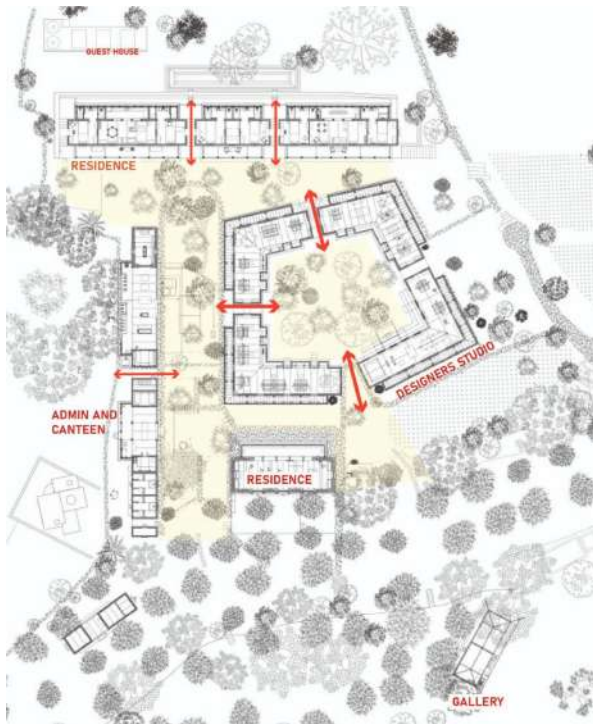
4.1.2 Orientation of built form

The orientation of buildings is organized so that they are mutually shaded. The courtyard is the most shaded space due to buildings in all 4 directions, along with vegetation. Thus this space is comfortable for the artisans to use for weaving and/or other social activities.



4.1.3 Circulation and Axis

The circulation of the complex is clearly defined by the change in levels of the site, along with the landscape that helps to direct its users. The main axis passes by the center of the courtyard, which can be seen as the main activity area.



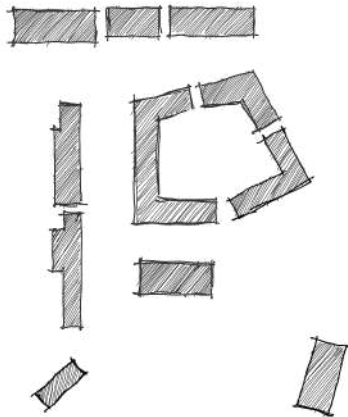
4.1.4 Use of materials

One of the most special features of this project was the use of low-cost, naturally sourced materials, and more importantly, how the architect made use of them so that their original character and purpose are preserved. The main spaces are made of bricks, finished with lime, covered by asbestos-free cement sheet roofs, and paved with stone floors. Adjacent working areas have lime floors and stone slab roofs.



4.1.5 Built to Unbuilt relationship

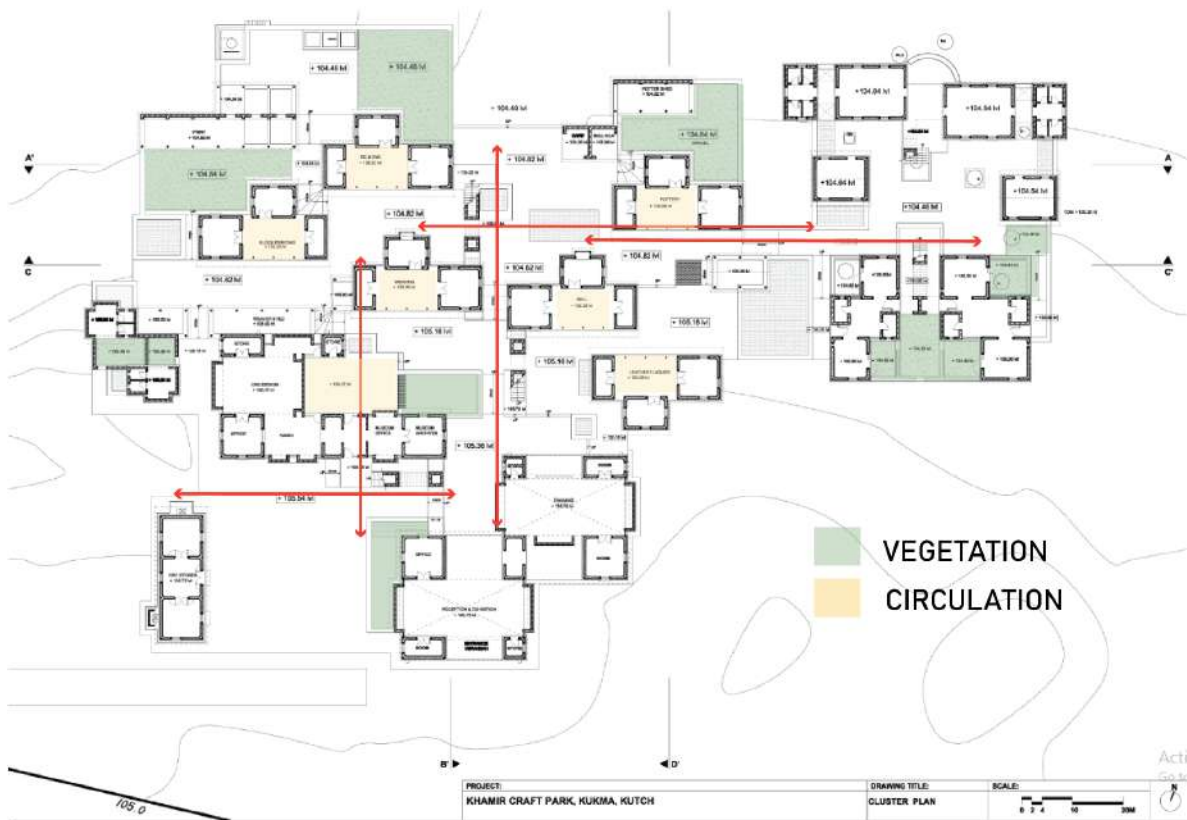
70 percent of the total site consists of greenery and open space- which is used as the circulation area. This is to ensure that the project blends in with the surrounding landscape. Courtyard spaces are centred to give an inclusive feeling to the people working in the studios, and so that they can work outdoors where it is easily accessible.



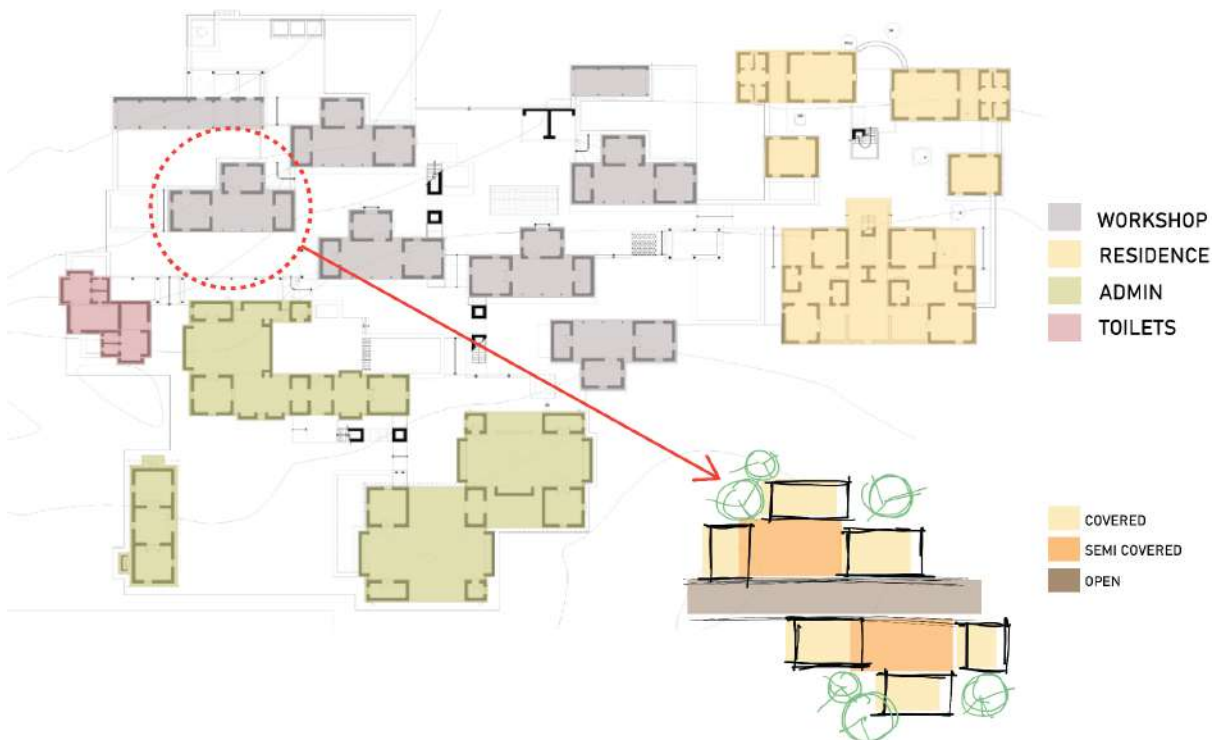
4.2 KHAMIR ARTISAN VILLAGE

Khamir artisan village is located 16km from Bhuj, in Kutch, Gujarat. It is a place that promotes, expands, and aids the traditional skills and knowledge of Kutch art, culture, heritage, and national resources. Designed by Neelkanth Chhaya, this project was established in the aftermath of the Bhuj earthquake, through a collaborative effort of non-profit and industry stakeholders in the Kutch region. The project aims to create a cultural resource center that enables artisans to conserve their traditional way of life by creating a sustainable livelihood built around their crafts.

Khamir is located on the outskirts of the city 10 km away from Bhuj. The immediate context is open lands. This center is derived from the local streetscape and village pattern noted before the earthquake.



The communities within are represented by the sensitive designs of the dwelling clusters, with user-friendly spaces that have workshops and artifacts open for public use as well. Overall the village gives a sense of inclusiveness that is also necessary for the promotion of muslim in this project as well.



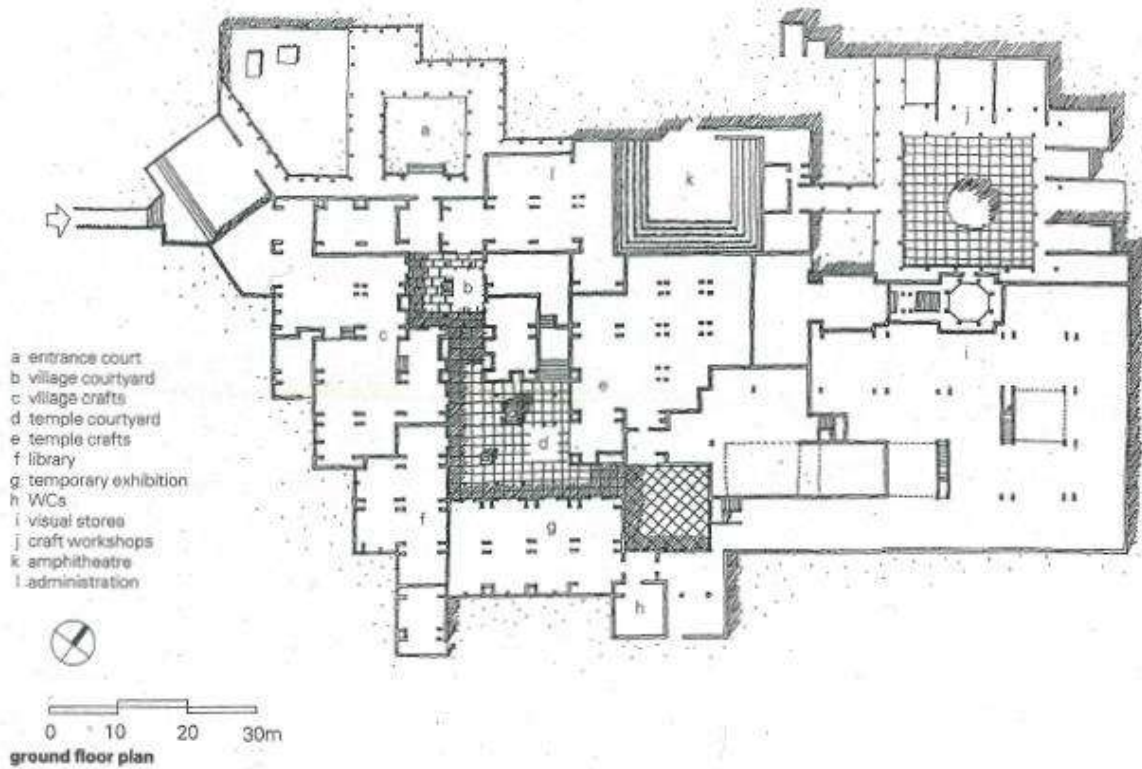
Architectural analysis

- Interrelation between closed, semi-open, and open spaces to create a natural and fresh environment for people working there.
- Kattas (outdoor seating) are provided in the courtyard.
- Staggered arrangement of built form



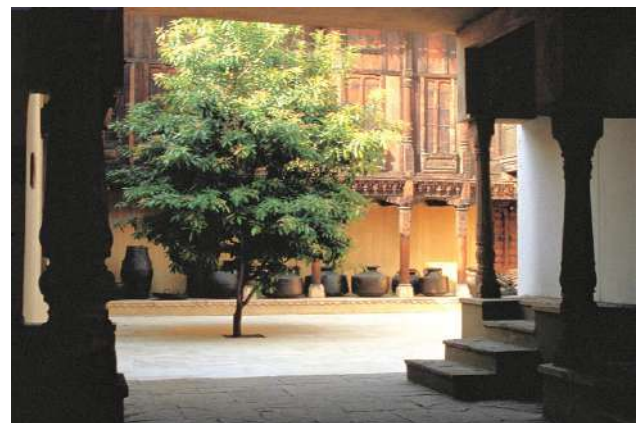
4.3 NATIONAL CRAFTS MUSEUM

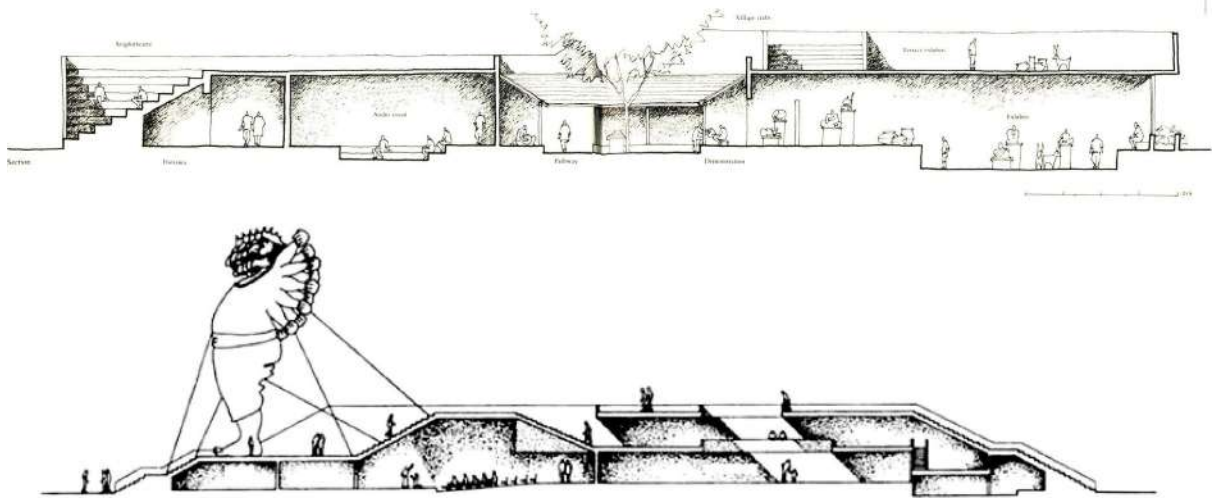
National crafts museum done by Architect Charles Correa was set up over a period of 30 years starting in the 1950s and 1960s by the efforts of late freedom fighter Smt Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay when the area was envisioned as an ethnographic space where craftsmen from various parts of India would come in to work in preserving the various traditional arts and crafts of India.



Source (<https://architecturecasestudies.wordpress.com/2020/09/26/national-crafts-museum-delhi/>)

This museum's importance lies in the fact that it shares a common space for artisans alike and different to share their work with counterparts from all over the country. This act transformed the space from a mere exhibit to a space to a cultural exchange and a craft promotion area. The stepping down of platforms and the actual use of steps to define both functions and edges of spaces echo the old bathing ghats of Varanasi and the Sarkej in Ahmadabad.





Longitudinal section (source: <https://architecturecasestudies.wordpress.com/2020/09/26/national-crafts-museum-delhi/>)



Circulation

The walk-through museum leads visitors through a series of open, semi-open, and enclosed spaces. The exhibition areas are divided into small sectional spaces for easy

accessibility reducing the problem of circulation. The crafts museum is organized around a central pathway, revealing a sequence of spaces along the pedestrian spine.

Zoning of spaces



Zoning diagram (source <https://architecturecasestudies.wordpress.com/2020/09/26/national-crafts-museum-delhi/>)

40 percent of the total area is occupied by the courtyards and exhibition spaces which act as the main focus of the museum.

CHAPTER 5: PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT AND ANALYSIS

Functional flow and program analysis

Programs are analyzed on the basis of site study as well as case studies, and modified accordingly from the proposed program list. The proposed program list includes-

- Exhibition space
- Multipurpose hall
- Administration block
- Research center
- Weaving station
- Pre weaving zone
- Rest house for visitors
- Cafe
- Sales center

After analysis of the site and context, there was a demand for an addition to the proposed programs, Hence several other programs were included which are

- Dwelling units
- Primary school and playground
- Bazaar

Total built area- 1,406,70 sq ft

Detailed area and square feet

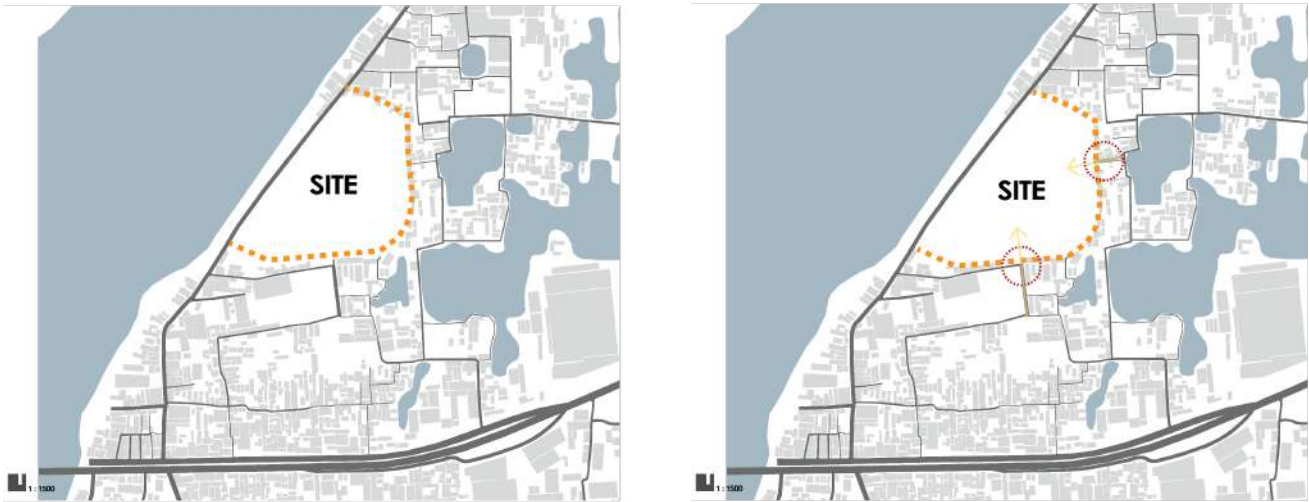
FUNCTION TYPE	PROGRAMS	DETAIL FUNCTIONS	AREA REQUIRED (SQFT)	PREFERRED LOCATION	SUNLIGHT (DIRECT)	AIRFLOW	TOTAL AREA (SQFT)
PRIVATE	DWELLING UNIT (ALLOCATED PLOT PER FAMILY- 1400 SQFT) SINGLE UNIT / DOUBLE STORIED TOTAL 62 FAMILIES	BED 2/ 3 DAWA/ PRE WEAVING SPACE TOILET + BATHING AREA KITCHEN KITCHEN garden	126 280 24 26 500	South or south east Facing to courtyard West and indoor West and indoor Outdoor and close to kitchen	Yes Yes N/A Yes Yes	YES YES N/A YES YES	86,800
	WEAVING STATION 300 FEMALE SPINNERS 45 WEAVERS (NUMBER OF STATIONS-5)	DESIGNERS STUDIO + WORKSHOP WEAVING SHED COTTON PROCESSING SHED TOILET + STORAGE OPEN SPACE	900 1600 750 165	West and indoor WATER EDGE PROXIMITY West and indoor West and indoor Semi outdoor	Yes N/A Yes N/A N/A	YES	17000
	DAYCARE			Indoor and semi outdoor	N/A	N/A	3000
SEMI PUBLIC	ADMIN BLOCK	RECEPTION ADMIN OFFICE ACCOUNTS OFFICE CONFERENCE ROOM INFORMATION AND RESOURCE	500 650 250 600 2500	Indoor			4500
	RESEARCH	RESEARCH LAB MATERIAL ARCHIVE YARN ANALYSIS LAB LIBRARY AND DOCUMENTATION	1000 600 500 2500	Indoor	N/A	N/A	4600
	MULTIPURPOSE (10 SQFT PER PERSON)			Indoor			2000

FUNCTION TYPE	PROGRAMS	DETAIL FUNCTIONS	AREA REQUIRED (SQFT)	PREFERRED LOCATION	SUNLIGHT (DIRECT)	AIRFLOW	TOTAL SQFT
PUBLIC	EXHIBITION CENTER	PERMANENT EXHIBITION OPEN GALLERY/TEMPORARY LOBBY SPACE OPEN(SEMI OUTDOOR PLATFORM FOR DISPLAY	4000 4000 2000 2500	INDOOR	YES	N/A	12,500
	DISPLAY MARKET AND SALES CENTER	SHED WITH ADJACENT DISPLAY AREA FOR CONSTANT DISPLAY AND WEEKLY FAIR OF MUSLIN PRODUCTS OPEN PLATFORM FOR MARKET		INDOOR AND SEMI OUTDOOR	YES	YES	700
	REST HOUSE FOR VISITORS (NO. OF ROOMS- 6)	ROOM SIZE COMMON LOBBY WATERFRONT ACTIVITY/RECREATION	300 1000	INDOOR	N/A	N/A	4500
	CAFE	RESTAURANT KITCHEN+ DINING FOR 250 SOUVENIR SHOP TOILET	4500 450 120	INDOOR AND SEMI OUTDOOR	N/A	YES	5070

TOTAL BUILT AREA- 1,406,70

CHAPTER 6: CONCEPT AND DESIGN DEVELOPMENT

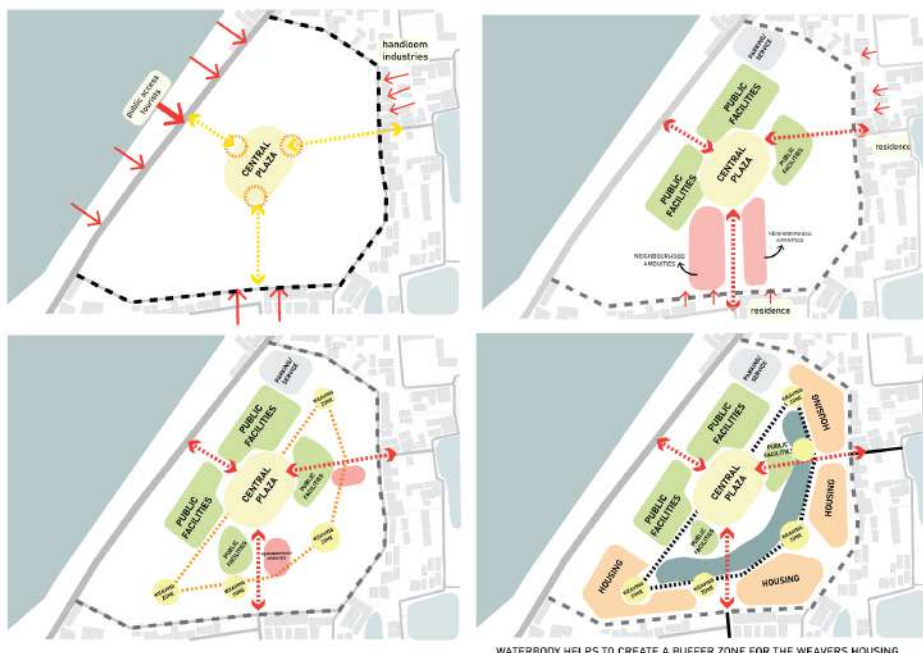
6.1 Development of concept



The conceptual ideas derived from the idea that the surrounding neighborhood, which was a low-income residential zone, be integrated into the design process, and provide easy access to the functions provided so that in the future local weavers would be able to interact and be part of the community, for example- by having access to its weaving stations. There would be an exchange of knowledge and learning that would benefit the community as a whole and further spread the art of muslin weaving.

The axis lines in the site are derived from 2 existing pedestrian roads heading towards the site - which ended as dead ends at the edge of the site.

The public access was from the vehicular road at the west, hence the intersection point was decided to be the central gathering zone, around which the functions would be located.



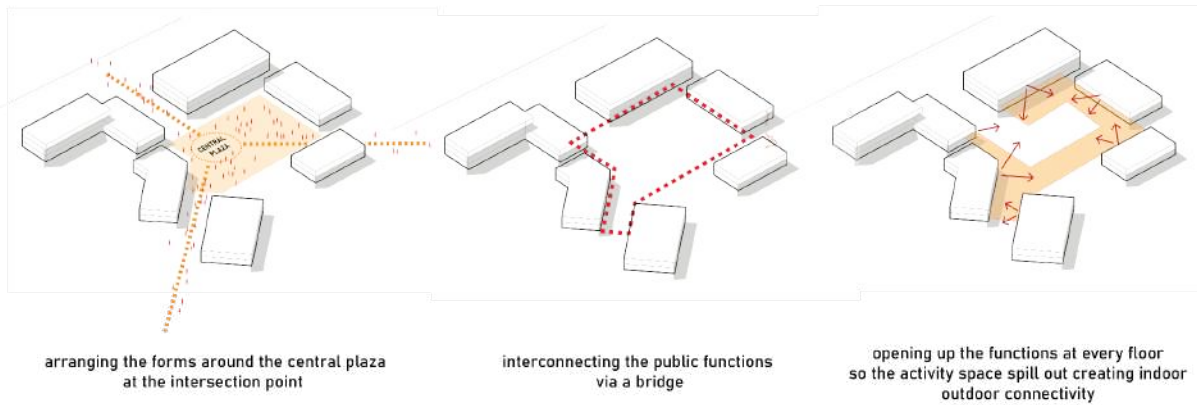
Zoning around the site (source:author)



Bubble diagram (source: author)

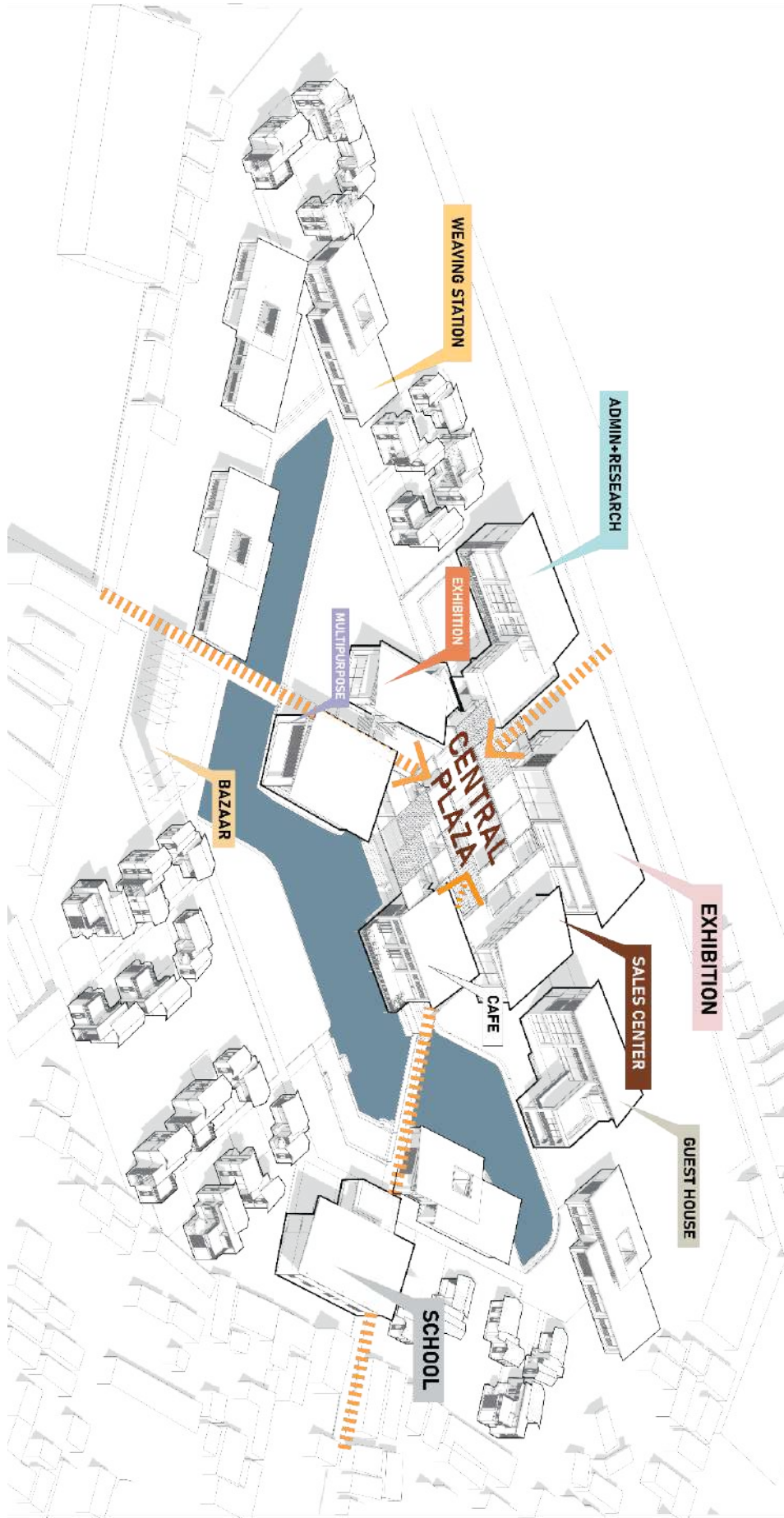
6.2 Derivation of forms

ARRANGEMENT OF FORMS



Form derivation (source: author)

6.3 Functional analysis of the complex

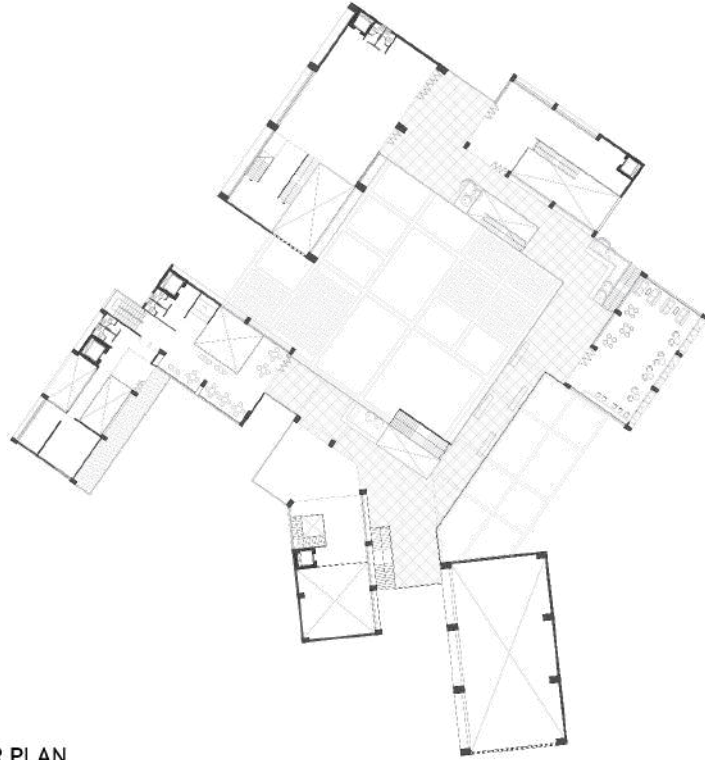


Source: Author

6.4 Final masterplans



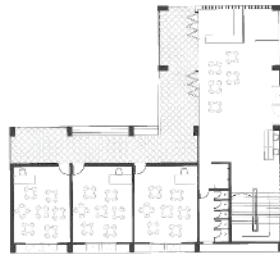
MASTERPLAN



● FIRST FLOOR PLAN



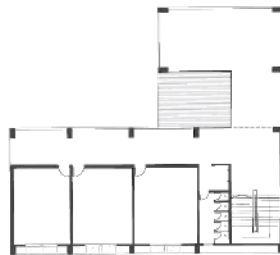
● GROUND FLOOR PLAN (guest house)



● GROUND FLOOR PLAN (school)



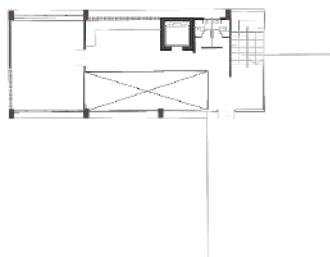
● 1st FLOOR PLAN (guest house)



● 1st FLOOR PLAN (school)

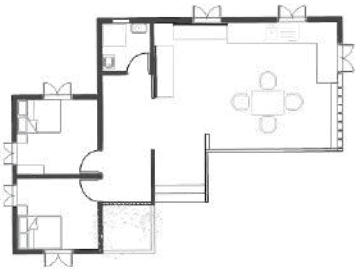


● 2nd FLOOR PLAN (guest house)



● 1st FLOOR PLAN (research center)

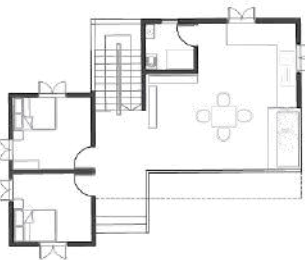
6.5 HOUSING TYPOLOGIES



ground floor plan



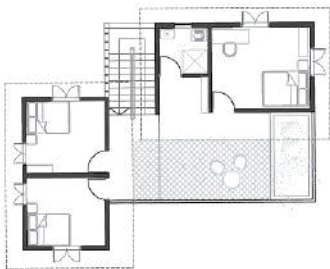
TYPOLGY 1



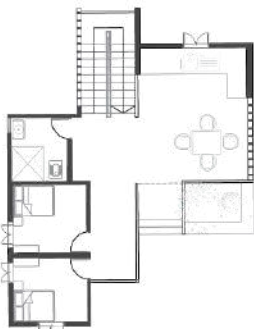
ground floor plan



TYPOLGY 2



1st floor plan

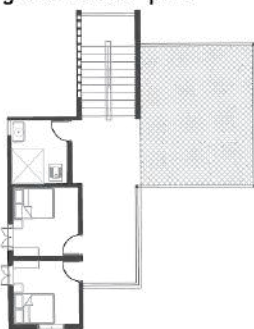


ground floor plan



TYPOLGY 3

source: author



1st floor plan

6.5 Elevations and Sections



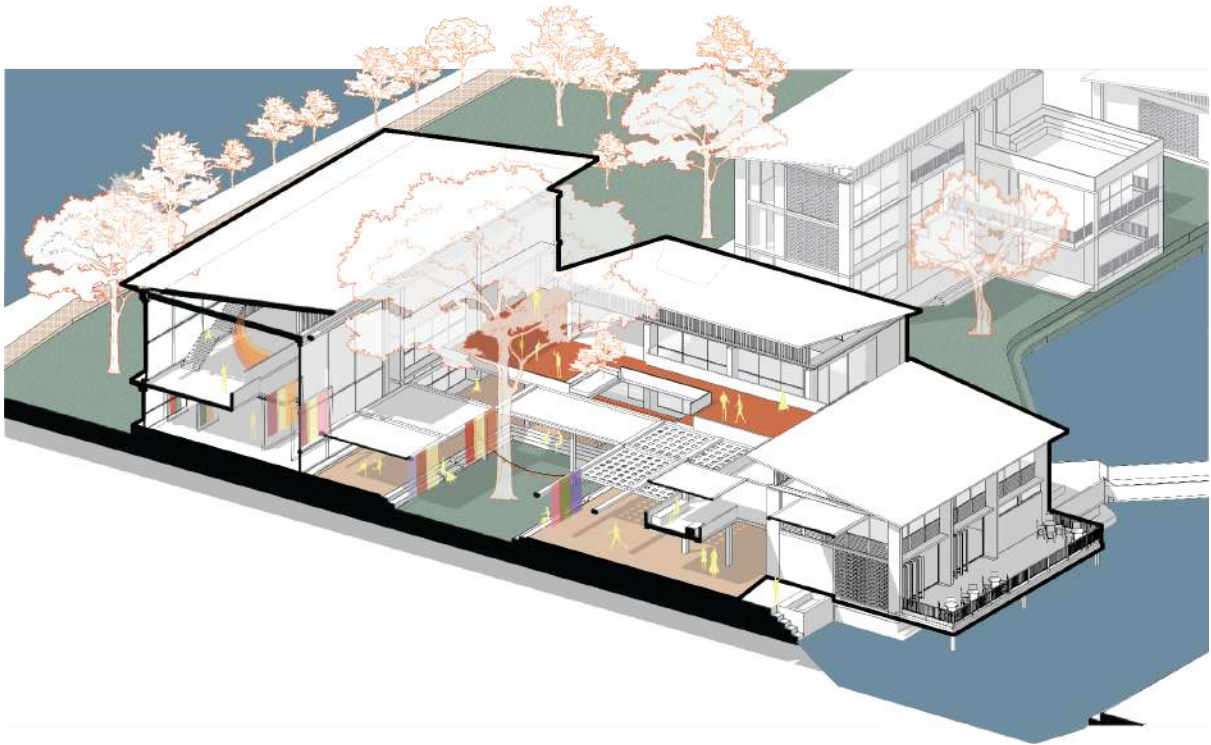
Longitudinal section of the site (source: author)



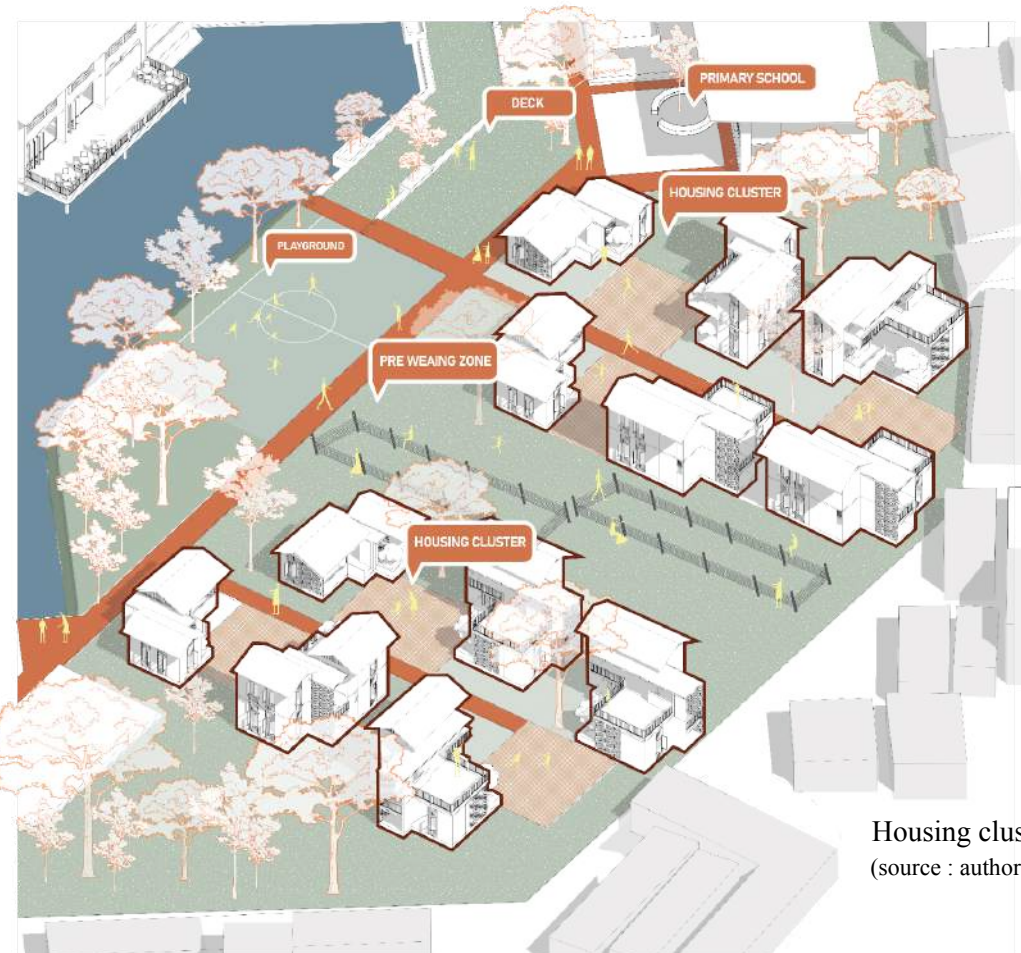
Section BB' (source: author)



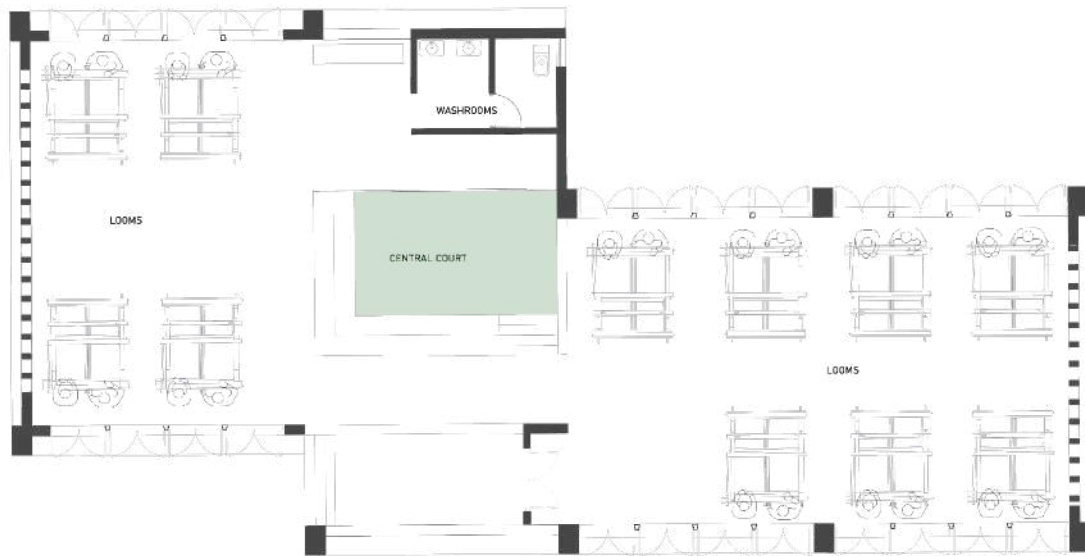
Section through housing cluster (source: author)



Section through plaza (source: author)



Housing cluster illustration
(source : author)



WEAVING STATION (source: author)



PERSPECTIVE SECTION OF WEAVING STATION (source: author)

6.6 RENDERED IMAGES



(source: author)



Weaving station render (source: author)

6.7 Physical model images



Central Plaza (source: author)





(source: author)





Blowup model images (source: author)

6.8 Conclusion

This project aims to bring back the traditions and long-lost art of muslin, and restore the golden heritage of Bengal which was lost almost 170 years ago. Along with creating a platform for muslin weavers to promote their craft and gain more exposure, the integration from the surrounding community in Tarabo was also vital as there is a prevailing history of muslin weaving alongside the banks of Sitalkshya. This design is an attempt to reimagine the concept of muslin cloth being worn and graced by the ultra-rich and privileged as was seen in ancient times- but a cloth that could be found being worn by any. It serves as an opportunity to enhance the weaver's community by providing them with their necessities and further spreading the craft of muslin weaving among generations.

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