Harvesters' Place

Project Name: Harvesters' Place
Project Category: Small
Project Location: Neyshabur, State of Khorasan Razavi, Iran
Completion date: 2021
Category of scale: Small Scale - Less than 5,000 GSF
Cost: $90,000

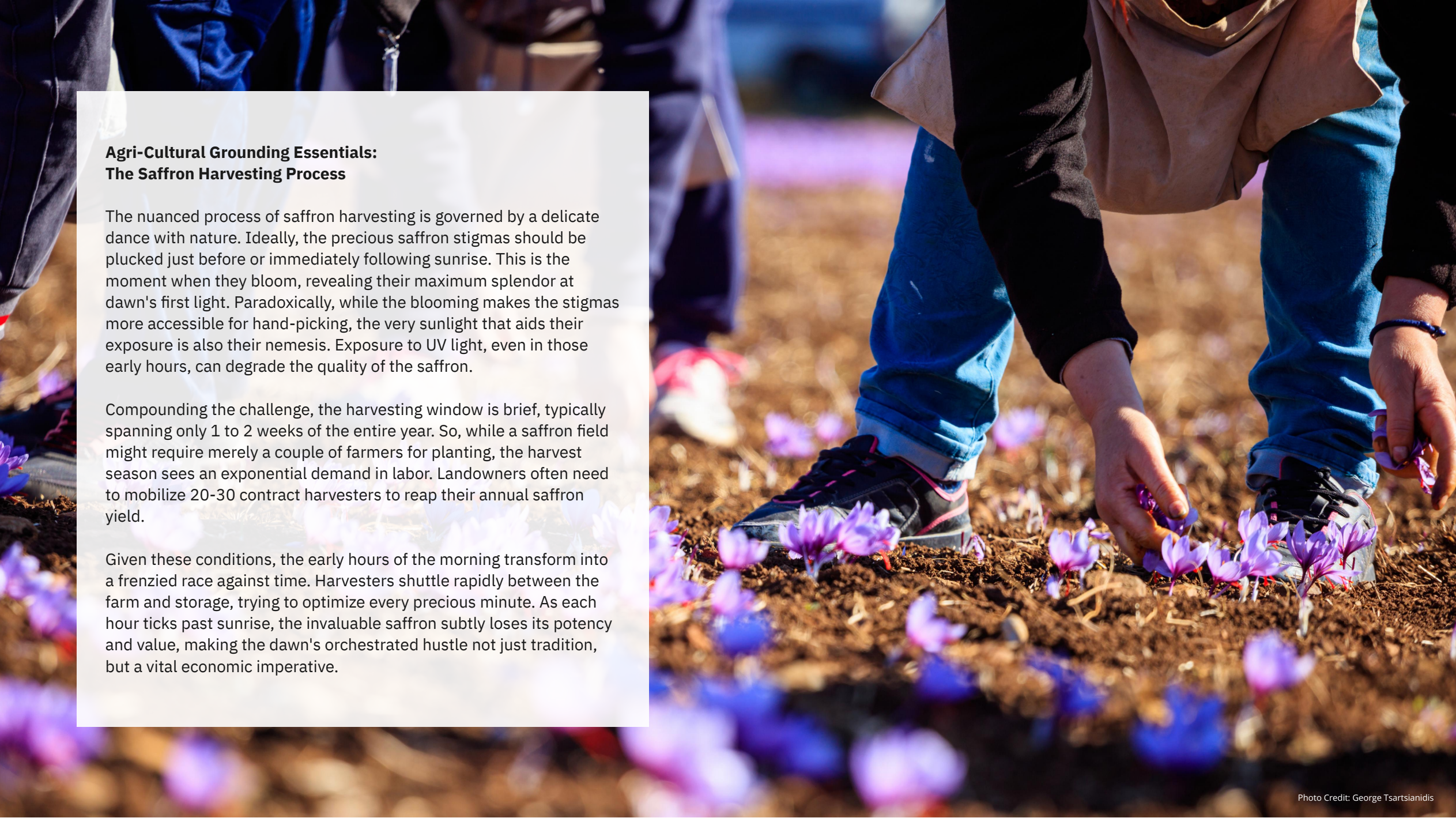
The goal of this project was to use the built form to offer a critical point of view about the culture of work.

In Neyshabur, Iran, saffron harvesting is a meticulous interplay between nature's rhythm, workforce alignment, and handling of the flower. It hinges on the moment around sunrise when the flowers bloom and the stigmas become exposed. The sunlight that assists this process, however, also diminishes saffron's quality. Given the brief yield window of 1 to 2 weeks yearly, the challenge intensifies. Therefore, the harvest sees a surge in contracted workforce.

The farm owner envisioned a storage-type facility to accommodate the influx of harvesters during the day and ensure security for the yield. The design team's research revealed the inefficiencies of the structure used briefly annually and its negative impact on worker morale, risking the essential harvest. In collaboration with the owner, the design pivoted from an agro-industrial facility to an agro-residential community: four live-work duplexes, combining storage and convenient lodging for contract workers to stay overnight rather than returning to their villages and commuting back early morning. Beyond meeting harvest needs, these units invite urbanites for village getaways, ensuring year-round vibrancy and rekindling the long lost bond between the city and the rural. The live-work typology is relatively rare in modern Iran, requiring a reinterpretation of traditional restorative courtyard with the lens of enhancing dynamics of work.

The construction of duplexes leveraged local workforce and utilized locally-sourced materials such as corrugated metal roofing, reclaimed wood facades, traditional brick flooring, and thermally efficient cinder block walls. The transformation was palpable post-completion in 2021. By 2023, the farm owner saw rental revenues from these units parallel the earnings from saffron. This design not only created an income source during the off-harvest season, but enriched the harvester's work experience by eliminating taxing morning commutes.

Harvesters' Place



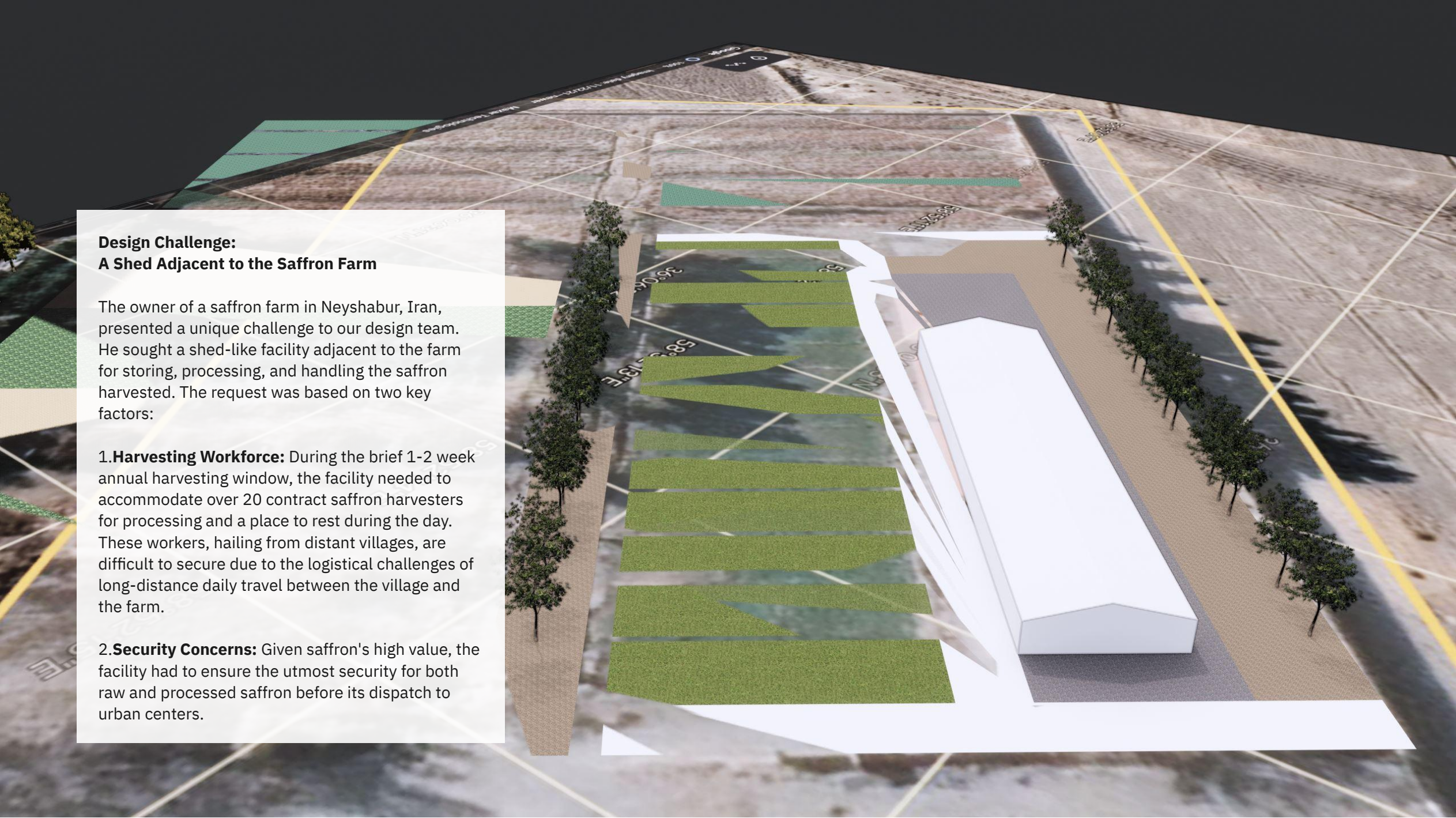
Agri-Cultural Grounding Essentials:
The Saffron Harvesting Process

The nuanced process of saffron harvesting is governed by a delicate dance with nature. Ideally, the precious saffron stigmas should be plucked just before or immediately following sunrise. This is the moment when they bloom, revealing their maximum splendor at dawn's first light. Paradoxically, while the blooming makes the stigmas more accessible for hand-picking, the very sunlight that aids their exposure is also their nemesis. Exposure to UV light, even in those early hours, can degrade the quality of the saffron.

Compounding the challenge, the harvesting window is brief, typically spanning only 1 to 2 weeks of the entire year. So, while a saffron field might require merely a couple of farmers for planting, the harvest season sees an exponential demand in labor. Landowners often need to mobilize 20-30 contract harvesters to reap their annual saffron yield.

Given these conditions, the early hours of the morning transform into a frenzied race against time. Harvesters shuttle rapidly between the farm and storage, trying to optimize every precious minute. As each hour ticks past sunrise, the invaluable saffron subtly loses its potency and value, making the dawn's orchestrated hustle not just tradition, but a vital economic imperative.

Photo Credit: George Tsartsianidis



Design Challenge:
A Shed Adjacent to the Saffron Farm

The owner of a saffron farm in Neyshabur, Iran, presented a unique challenge to our design team. He sought a shed-like facility adjacent to the farm for storing, processing, and handling the saffron harvested. The request was based on two key factors:

1.**Harvesting Workforce:** During the brief 1-2 week annual harvesting window, the facility needed to accommodate over 20 contract saffron harvesters for processing and a place to rest during the day. These workers, hailing from distant villages, are difficult to secure due to the logistical challenges of long-distance daily travel between the village and the farm.

2.**Security Concerns:** Given saffron's high value, the facility had to ensure the utmost security for both raw and processed saffron before its dispatch to urban centers.

Design Solution:
Meeting Cultural & Agricultural Imperative

Engaging in conversations with farmers, harvesters, and the owner, the design team highlighted potential pitfalls in the owner's initial vision:

1.**Resource Efficiency:** A structure active for merely 10-12 weeks annually wasn't a sustainable or efficient proposition.

2.**Worker Morale:** Housing 20 harvesters in a vast, barn-like structure might deter them, potentially compromising the crucial harvest due to their absenteeism.

In a pivot from an agro-industrial facility to an agro-residential community, the design team proposed an alternative: four live-work duplexes. Each duplex features two separate units, perfectly suited for four harvesters' temporary stay as well as storing and processing of saffron. This arrangement not only provides a secure space for the product but also incentivizes harvesters with comfortable accommodation, reducing potential absenteeism due to travel. The design also presented an enticing opportunity for city dwellers seeking a rustic village escape over weekends; therefore, it ensured the farm to remain a hub of activity, purpose, and productivity year-round as opposed to a few weeks per year.

design for change

Design for integration

Regional Relevance and Typological Innovation

Live-work typology is relatively rare in modern Iran. Therefore, its reinterpretation for the site demanded a nuanced understanding of work habits and daily rituals.

Traditional Iranian homes are renowned for their courtyards, sanctuaries of privacy and family intimacy. For the live-work duplexes, the courtyard metamorphosed into a liminal space, striking new dynamics between public and private. By making the building's façade occupiable, it not only safeguards the yard but also enables harvesters to rejuvenate while staying connected to the workflow.

Construction, Materiality, Sustainability

The construction approach was a testament to efficiency and regional relevance. Quick to build, economical, and tapping into local resources and craftsmanship, the design incorporated corrugated metal double roof, reclaimed wood for the façade, traditional permeable break flooring, and cinder block walls as thermal mass. All these materials were conscientiously sourced within a 10-mile radius.

Design for resources

Design for energy

Design for economy

Community Impact:
Diversified Revenue, Harvester Well-being, and Rural-Urban Connection

The live-work units were completed in 2021, marking the beginning of a transformative phase for the farm owner. In 2023, the revenue generated from renting out the eight live-work units during the off-harvest season nearly matched the earnings from the saffron during its peak harvest. This diversified the farm owner's income streams and optimized resource use throughout the year. Moreover, the harvesters benefited immensely. The provision of on-site accommodation eliminated the logistical and physical strains of daily commutes from their distant villages, ensuring they could focus on the harvest and rest adequately, enhancing overall productivity and well-being.

Design for wellbeing

cover crops used in rotation

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