Conservation of Leh Old Town—Concepts and Challenges

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The Tibetan cultural regions across the Himalayas are famous for their large monastic settlements, but they have produced comparatively few cities. In Tibet itself, most of these have changed beyond recognition as a result of the very rapid advent of modernization in the region since the 1950s. Political events, such as the Chinese occupation of Tibet, have further diminished Tibet's urban heritage.

By contrast, Leh—the former royal and current administrative capital of Ladakh—still preserves important monuments from the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries. The city is dominated by the former royal palace, a nine-storey stone structure erected in the early 17th century in the Himalayan style made famous by the slightly later Potala Palace in Lhasa. The Old Town, consisting of some 200 stone, mud and timber houses sandwiched between thick rammed earth walls, is located on the slope below the palace, still accessed by a number of ancient stupa gateways. The city is therefore a very important example of historic Tibeto-Himalayan urban architecture.

Lhasa and Leh not only share a common architectural heritage: the historic districts of both cities have also faced many of the same problems in the 20th and 21st centuries. Both have had infrastructure deficits, such as a lack of piped water and drainage facilities, and both have been deserted by many of the original owners. In Lhasa, this process has been enforced by the authorities for urban policy reasons, while in Leh the wealthier families simply moved to the leafy green suburbs of the town.

The Tibet Heritage Fund (THF), an international NGO which was founded in 1996, has experience of working in both Lhasa and Leh. Between 1996 and 2000, it conducted the Lhasa Old Town Conservation Project, which developed an approach of using local craftsmen to restore the area, with the full support of the local community. In 2003, a THF team came to Leh and, after carrying out an initial survey of the Old Town, decided to launch a similar project in Ladakh. This paper shares their experience. It begins with a summary of the history of Leh, and then discusses the challenges that the THF has faced, the solutions that it has found and the implications for the future conservation of Ladakh's built heritage.
In 1995 one of the doyens of Ladakh studies, the late Dr. Henry Osmaston (1922–2006), first suggested to André Alexander that he should go to Ladakh and map historic Leh. The occasion was the seventh seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies (IATS) held in Austria, where a THF team introduced the project of mapping historic Lhasa. Dr. Osmaston pointed to the need to record old Leh’s historic buildings as soon as possible, as Leh was changing fast and old buildings were disappearing all too quickly. This paper is dedicated to his memory.

**Historic Leh**

For centuries the kingdom of Ladakh was an important crossroads of the Central Asian caravan trade, sharing many cultural traits as well as language and religion with Tibet. Other Central Asian cultures have also left strong traces. Tibetans reached Ladakh as early as the second half of the seventh century and left behind inscriptions, for example near the Alchi bridge. In the early 10th century Skyilde Nyimagon (sKyid lde nyi ma mgon), a descendant of the last king of Tibet’s Yarlung dynasty who was assassinated around 842 CE, founded a Western Tibetan kingdom. That was, more or less, the start of the Ladakhi dynasty which ruled until 1834.

The earliest known royal domain of this dynasty was in Shey in the Indus valley, some 15 km upstream from Leh. The early history of Leh itself is shrouded in mystery. The discovery of a Buddhist monument with a Tibetan inscription dated to the period between the eighth and the tenth centuries suggests the existence of a human settlement at Leh at the time, centuries before Leh entered recorded history. This is a two metre-tall image of a standing Maitreya engraved on a rock in the ruins of an old house at the edge of the Old Town, found during the THF’s community survey. It has since been recovered and permanently installed in front of the former Sankar Labrang (gSang mkhar bla brang) building in Manikhang (Maṇi khang) area of old Leh. Leh’s strategic location in the centre of the stretch of the Indus River that defines most of

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1 See Denwood (1980, 2008, 2009) and Bruneau (2004). See also the unpublished paper by Takeuchi Tsuguhito, ‘Old Tibetan Rock Inscriptions near Alchi’ (kindly made available by Amy Heller and Quentin Devers), as well as the discussion on Ladakh’s early history in Phuntsog Dorjay’s article in this volume.


3 See Alexander & van Schaik (2011). Again, see also Phuntsog Dorjay’s article in this volume.