

TRADITION AND INNOVATION IN THE TIBETAN DIASPORA

Ernesto Noriega

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In 1959 thousands of Tibetans, forced to flee their country, crossed over the Himalayas into India. Today, there are approximately 150,000 living in exile, mainly in the almost fifty settlements scattered throughout India and Nepal, but also in Bhutan, Europe, the United States and Canada.

Over the past sixty years, the Tibetan exile community has been successful in organizing the resettlement process and in meeting the basic needs of a growing number of refugees. Today, their biggest challenge is no longer physical survival, but the survival of their endangered culture. Uprooted and dispersed, Tibetans undergo a painful process of adaptation and struggle to maintain the viability of their unique way of life. Time and time again, community leaders have exhorted their people not to forget, to make efforts to integrate traditional values and knowledge into their changing lifestyles and into their new professional activities - and not to let their heritage die before being transmitted to the next generation.

One of the most visible signs of this commitment to tradition is the presence of “Tibetan-style buildings” wherever a new community is established. A temple or monastery in the traditional fashion – often smaller replicas of the ones left behind – or a characteristic detail adorning a humble home give these settlements some sense of identity and are concrete reminders of the community’s perseverance.

I arrived in the Himalayas in 1990 and visited several of these Tibetan settlements, motivated in part by my interest in the role architecture can play in the process of cultural resistance and renewal, especially for indigenous peoples. There I found that a new generation of modern Tibetan builders was emerging. They had been born in exile and educated in India as civil engineers or architects. And in the face of the decline of old building practices and the destruction of the vast majority of historical monuments in Tibet, these young professionals carried the responsibility of maintaining their building tradition alive.

But predictably, their university education had not prepared them to meet this challenge. At best, their knowledge of their architectural heritage was superficial and fragmentary, and they had never been inside a genuine traditional building. This created a frustrating situation and a potentially dangerous one as well, since any attempt to practice Tibetan architecture without a profound understanding of its essence and deeper meaning would be a risky enterprise - one

that could end up accelerating its death. A nostalgic approach limited to the strict reproduction of old models, and ignoring new environmental conditions and rejecting the introduction of appropriate materials and technologies would render the tradition inflexible and non-adaptive. And the indiscriminate use of forms and symbols inappropriately and out of context, turning distinctive elements into mere decorative clichés, could finally reduce Tibetan architecture to a caricature of itself.

At the same time, it seemed extremely difficult to effectively resume the interrupted tradition. The information was dispersed and of difficult access. Being an unwritten tradition passed on by example from generation to generation, the necessary knowledge existed mainly in the minds of the craftsmen and master-builders who were now scattered about and who for many years had not been able to practice their craft - and who were growing old without transmitting their skills. Furthermore, the main sources of learning, the monuments themselves - or whatever was left of them - remained off-limits in the homeland, and other examples outside Tibet were located in remote parts of the Himalayas.

Against this background I was asked by the Tibetan exile administration based in northern India to serve as an architect and collaborate with the design of new buildings for the community. Instead, after long consultations with community members, I proposed a program to enable young Tibetans to regain access to their building tradition, as an effort to guarantee its development and continuity. Consequently, the Initiative for the Preservation, Development and Promotion of Tibetan Architecture and Construction Practices came into being in early 1991. The immediate aim of the project was to collect all information relevant to the built heritage, and then to use this material to promote interest in it, especially among the young. A broader objective was to create the conditions for the emergence of a social space where a new generation of Tibetans living between tradition and modernity could start to reconstruct the memory of their cultural heritage and make creative use of this recovered legacy in the process of redefining their identity and constructing their future.

The Last Architect of Lhasa

The initiative was launched with a symbolic act. Its goal was to enable two young Tibetans, a civil engineer and an architecture apprentice, to make a two-day journey to visit Jigme Taring. Mr. Taring had been a government official until 1959 when he had to flee Tibet, and was regarded as the “last architect” of Lhasa, the capital. He had designed the summer residence for the present Dalai Lama, who was an adolescent at the time. Soon after his arrival in India he drew a sketch map of Lhasa including all important monuments and landmarks. Later

in life, after retiring as director of a school for refugee children in northern India, he started work on his old ambition: to make a detailed plan of the seventh-century Jokhang, the oldest and most revered temple in Tibet. Fearing the temple would be destroyed, he felt an urgent need to preserve its memory for the younger generations. He drew the plans from memory as he knew the temple well. He then built a large-scale model that was displayed in all Tibetan settlements.

To the young Tibetan builders, the old man incarnated the survival of the building tradition in exile. The meeting was momentous. Although several Western scholars and students of Tibetan architecture had visited and interviewed him previously, this was the first time young Tibetans had made the pilgrimage to seek his knowledge. Although fragile and ailing at the time, Taring talked to his two young visitors for several hours. He told them how as a young man in Tibet, he had taught himself through observation of the old monuments and long conversations with traditional master-builders, and how he later learned from British army officers how to draw plans and sections. He brought out old photographs and drawings, told them anecdotes and made sketches to show them the way buildings were constructed in old Tibet.

When we told Taring about the initiative and our plans to visit the architecture of the Tibetan border regions, he was enthusiastic. With a tone of urgency, he said: “Yes, go and visit the monuments wherever you can, open your eyes and ears and make sketches, take photographs, ask questions, study the old stones. Even in ruins one can find precious information, small drops of knowledge here and there. And don’t get discouraged, remember that small drops make a mighty ocean”.

Arrangements were made for another visit in the future to record his memories. It was not to be: Jigme Taring died two months later.

Documentation Centre

During the early stages of the initiative, our goal was to create a receptacle where all the recovered “drops of knowledge” could be collected, a place where the scattered fragments of memory could be assembled like a giant jigsaw-puzzle in order to reconstruct the past. For this purpose, a specialized documentation centre dedicated to the preservation and promotion of Tibetan architecture was established. It consisted of a small thematic library and an archives section where photographs, drawings, testimonies, historical texts and research documents could be gathered, preserved and organized so as to facilitate access by the general public, especially the younger generation.

The central feature of the archive was the photograph collection for which more than twenty-five hundred historical architecture photographs were initially gathered. Most were

reproductions from private collections, museums and colonial institutions in Europe, images that until then had been inaccessible to Tibetans. The photographs show Tibet as it was before its destruction. Many are unique records of monumental buildings, religious complexes, towns and villages that no longer exist.

Adolescents were especially enthusiastic users of the photo-archive and would later contribute to its development. We built a darkroom where the young people could print and enlarge the photographs that had been brought to India mostly in the form of negatives or contact sheets. During this process, their intense fascination was manifest every time an image was slowly revealed, like the opening of a magic window allowing them to rediscover valuable aspects of their stolen past. The young Tibetans realized that their ancestors had developed a rich architectural tradition well adapted to and in harmony with a difficult environment. In the darkroom they became exposed to a world populated by extraordinary structures, veritable feats of engineering. They discovered countless monumental fortresses strategically located atop inaccessible summits, and giant monasteries housing thousands of monks, resembling small towns in their size and complexity. They also learned how their ancestors had extended the building activities far beyond monasteries and towns and had transformed entire landscapes through the use of structures that marked historical events, defined boundaries, and ordered the ritual use of space, serving as focal-points for worship or as stations along pilgrimage routes.

Young Tibetans also found that there were many lessons that could be learned from the old building tradition which offered relevant solutions to today's challenges. For example, monasteries that at some point in history had been confronted with a rapid increase in population, suddenly having to accommodate thousands of monks on a limited amount of land, developed sophisticated high-density housing that in many ways resembled housing developed in the West during recent decades. Surprised about the "modern" quality of these solutions, young Tibetans were excited about the points of coincidence between their own tradition and the prestigious and much admired contemporary architecture.

The historical photographs were complemented by a slide-collection consisting of hundreds of recent and contemporary images showing the evolution of Tibetan architecture⁶. This collection was an important tool for making comparative studies and reconstructing the recent histories of monuments or towns, making it possible to monitor changes sustained over the years, such as the level of destruction and successive stages of reconstruction.

The photo-collections encompassed the architecture of the various regions of Tibet and also of other areas within its cultural sphere of influence, from the old Buddhist kingdoms along the Himalayas all the way to Mongolia and south-central Siberia. This material promoted the

understanding that the Tibetan building tradition is flexible and has always been capable of adapting to diverse cultural and ecological conditions.

Field Work

For any serious student of architecture, all the information acquired from photographs, drawings, books and interviews can at best be a secondary source of knowledge, useful when the actual structures no longer exist or when they are inaccessible. Nothing can replace the direct experience of touching and walking through and around a building.

Consequently, during August and September of 1993, we undertook our first field trip to the architectural monuments of Ladakh, a region within the Tibetan cultural realm but which today lays within India's borders. We first visited several monasteries and traditional villages along the Indus valley. This was the participants' first interaction with genuine examples of their architectural heritage. Then we settled in Samkar monastery, where we spent four weeks measuring and documenting its buildings. It was the first attempt by the team to fully document a historical monument. A complete and meticulous survey of the monastic complex was carried out and accurate architectural drawings were produced. Additional documentation included photographs, sketches and interviews with the resident monks. The extended stay at Samkar offered an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the organization and functioning of the monastery and the relationships between the built space and the rhythms of monastic life and religious ritual.

Useful skills and methodological expertise were gained through this exercise, and the documentation produced was a valuable record of a historical monument and would contribute to its preservation. But aside from these expected benefits, the expedition to Ladakh also revealed how such an event can provide the context for a unique and multifaceted learning experience.

Ladakh is probably the closest one can get to experiencing old Tibet, and the expedition was a valuable opportunity for young Tibetans to be exposed to a traditional way of life that closely resembles their own but which, unlike their own, has been spared the traumatic experience of rapid and violent change. In addition to the practical knowledge gained from the study of the monuments themselves, they were confronted with questions relevant to their professional evolution as both traditional and modern designers and builders. They could observe, for example, how remote villages were beginning to change under the first influences of modernity, the degree of change usually depending on their proximity to a main road. Or how monasteries were responding differently to new architectural challenges posed mainly by the rapid increase in tourism, as the sudden income was often reinvested in conservation or

renovation work, and in the conversion of old structures or the addition of new ones to accommodate visitors.

A series of unexpected encounters took place during this journey. At several places, we met with groups of Western architects studying or documenting monasteries and conservation experts intervening to save endangered buildings and murals. Our young team members were surprised by the foreigners' high regard for Tibetan architecture and by their commitment to preserve it. This was a source of encouragement and a boost to their self-esteem. These encounters also provided opportunities for some fruitful cooperation. At the monastery of Ridzong, for example, we spent several days with a group of researchers from the University of Berlin who were making a full survey of the religious complex. It was an interesting and mutually beneficial exchange, in which the Tibetans could learn from the Germans' accurate surveying methodology, and the Berlin architects could gain insight through the Tibetans' familiarity with the religious and cultural background. A sense of partnership grew out of this relationship and, for our team, the important realization that they as Tibetans not only have much to learn from others but also much to offer.

Architecture Club

The documentation resulting from the survey of Samkar monastery in Ladakh was used to promote another main objective of the project: to stimulate interest in Tibetan architecture among students. An exhibition of the drawings, photographs, and sketches, complemented by a slide presentation and lecture about the architectural heritage, was organized at the Tibetan Children Village School. We invited students ages fifteen to eighteen to get involved in the project. Suddenly dozens of them wanted to become architects. Because of our limited resources and infrastructure, we could only choose eleven highly motivated boys and girls to form what would become the architecture club.

In the following months, the group of school students, which named itself Nyampa Larso, undertook a series of activities that took place mostly on weekends and holidays so as not to interfere with their schoolwork. They were introduced to the language of architectural drawing and to basic graphic communication skills, to the point where they could read plans and sections and were able to express their own ideas on paper. They learned how to use photo and video equipment and applied their new knowledge to document local buildings. They also made a field trip to Ladakh and surveyed a monastery, producing drawings that they later exhibited at other schools in various settlements. They met with artists and traditional craftsmen and recorded their

know-how. From monks and Buddhist scholars, they learned about religious symbolism in architecture and about the historical background of several monuments.

In addition, the students had access to publications dealing with diverse subjects related to construction, from conservation of historical monuments to the new currents in modern architecture. They were also exposed to information dealing with ecology, appropriate building technologies, and the way in which other traditional societies were struggling to create living environments which were in harmony with their cultural values and needs.

Increasingly, the young members of Nyampa Larso assumed new responsibilities and contributed actively to the development of the documentation centre. They learned how to develop film and print photographs in the darkroom and organized and catalogued archival material. They were also very effective in identifying potential sources of information, especially among elderly members of the community, recording their accounts and sometimes translating their descriptions into illustrations of the evoked building or village.

Creative Workshops

Our next step was to organize a series of design workshops in which the group would be encouraged to imagine what their house, neighbourhood or village would ideally look like if they could live in Tibet. At this point I would like to relate in some detail how one of these workshops unfolded because I think it throws some light on the kind of processes this initiative tried to facilitate.

On this occasion, the students were asked to choose the first thing they would design and build if they could return to a free Tibet. Initial suggestions ranged from the rehabilitation of historical monuments to proposals for structures without precedent in traditional Tibet, such as a house of parliament, an Olympic stadium or the headquarters for a women's organization. Then somebody said: "Let's rebuild the Chagpori!" and everybody agreed immediately.

The choice was significant, not only because of the building's religious and historic importance - it had been founded by one of Tibet's most venerated saints and had later become the main centre of learning for Tibetan medicine - but because of its present-day political symbolism. Along with the well-known Potala palace, the Chagpori monastery had once towered high over Lhasa, and together the two monuments had framed the main access to the capital city. In 1959, the monastery was razed to the ground and replaced by a large telecommunications tower that still stands today, looming over the city as a conspicuous reminder of the political status quo. Knowing this, it is not surprising that the students felt that the reinstatement of the sacred monument was a priority.

Once the decision was made, they set out to find as much information as possible about the disappeared structure. Several old photographs from our archives provided details about the building's exterior. We could find no information about its interior, however. Scholars were consulted and investigations carried out in the community without any results other than a brief description of the main altar discovered in an old text. Then word came that a very old monk, a traditional doctor who had been trained at the Chagpori monastery as a young man, was living in a settlement just a few hours away. A meeting was arranged, and the students interviewed him at length. At first the old doctor said it had all been so long ago that he could surely not remember very much. But with the aid of the photographs, the young girls and boys led their informant through the different parts of the building, pushing him to strain his memory for useful information: How many columns were in the main hall? How many paces between columns? Were there any sources of natural light? And so on. Applying their newly acquired drawing skills, the students translated these fragments of memory into plans and sections until an overall configuration of the structure emerged.

Walking in the night after the meeting with the old man, an atmosphere of solemnity surrounded our little group. Then someone said: "Hey, the old man could die anytime, and all that information would be gone. We just saved it somehow. We should be doing this at least once a week and everyone at school should do the same with their grandparents or with every old person they know." It was as if an awareness of the fragility of their culture had just sunk in and a new sense of urgency was germinating in their young minds.

After the virtual reconstruction of the monument was completed and a model of it was made, the next step was to return to the original assignment of the exercise, which was to design the building that would replace the old one. What should this structure look like?

At this point different factions of opinion began to emerge, and before long a passionate debate broke out. The "traditionalists" insisted that the monastery should be rebuilt in exact conformity with the original model, arguing that their ancestors had been wise people who had still lived in a harmonious and intact world, and nobody living in the present times of confusion could pretend to improve on their creation. One girl was convinced that even if it would be possible to build an identical replica of the sacred structure, the power and sanctity of the place had been irreversibly lost. Then there were those who believed the new building should be modern in design and incorporate the latest construction technologies. They maintained that Tibet should be part of the twentieth century and that they should show the world they could also be "players" in the international arena.

All these opinions were legitimate, of course, and reflected many of the conflicting convictions, tendencies, anxieties and aspirations that make up the collective psychological

landscape of the community. Through their emotional involvement in the debates, the students were bringing these contradictions to the surface and facing them, inadvertently dealing with profound and difficult questions concerning their identity as contemporary Tibetans. And later, through their design choices for the new Chagpori, they were in a sense beginning to redefine themselves and their perception of their people's place in the world. They could do this creatively, almost playfully, through imagining, drawing, and modelling. In this safe and permissive context, conflicting positions were reconciled, compromises were worked out, and new syntheses began to emerge. This search for the ideal design was a search for the future, the striving to find - as one student put it - "a middle way that would take advantage of the best of both worlds". And this adventure was now sustained by their ability to tap into the works and knowledge of their ancestors that they had helped to assemble in the documentation centre.

Significantly, during this time, several of the students felt the need to discuss their feelings and uncertainties with elder family members, teachers and religious counsellors, asking for opinions and advice, engaging them in the debate, and opening the way for the process to move beyond the workshop and include different generations and experiences. Visions resulting from such an inclusive dynamic should not be dismissed as mere products of illusion without consequence. Once they enter the social realm and catch the imagination of the community, attention can shift to action and the search for concrete solutions.

Perhaps some of these boys and girls will become architects or town-planners and realise their visions. But all of them, whatever they end up doing, will carry with them the insights gained through their shared experience: the renewed respect for the knowledge of their elders, a commitment to their cultural heritage, a greater capacity to evaluate critically the virtues and weaknesses of the Western model, the courage to imagine a better future, and the self-confidence to construct it on the foundations of traditional values while benefiting from the possibilities offered by modernity.

This project was motivated by the belief that if the process leading to the loss of cultural heritage can be reversed, vulnerable societies will then be empowered to take their destiny into their own hands and be better equipped to envision and construct their future on their own terms. Likewise, the initiative was guided by the certainty that some of the most valuable resources necessary to achieve this, such as memory and creativity, are already present in the communities themselves and can be reactivated by the simple recognition of their importance and the removal of the obstacles that currently hinder them. The way the project evolved has only served to reinforce this conviction.

General Observations

1. The Role of Visual Archives

In older times, indigenous peoples did not have access to the photographic or motion picture technologies that would have enabled them to make a visual record of their physical world. And even when they did, there were often cultural or religious constraints that limited their use. In Tibet, for example, the few people who could afford a camera were discouraged from using one, and it is reported that an aristocrat was once degraded for the “undignified posture” he assumed while taking photographs. So, ironically, most visual records that exist of the now-vanished living environments of traditional societies - and which today could be so valuable to these peoples’ efforts to reconstruct their past - were produced by the administrators, soldiers, scientists, and explorers serving the very same colonial powers that brought about the processes that precipitated the collapse of those cultural environments. And at present, most of this documentation remains in Western institutions and out of reach for the communities that could make the best use of them. During my own hunt for images of Tibetan architecture in Europe, I came across tens of thousands of historical photographs depicting the monuments, towns, and villages of many other ethnic minorities from all over the world. Only through lengthy negotiations and a series of fortunate circumstances did I manage to obtain permission to make new copies of the Tibetan material, and so realized how difficult it would be for any indigenous group to lay claim to these precious records of their heritage. Clearly, it is essential to find ways to expedite the return of this information to the peoples concerned.

Recovering and safely storing this documentation is an important task for the community, but it can only be a first step. We have seen how by inserting these images in a dynamic context they can become a unique learning instrument and a catalyst for vital social and creative processes, such as the restoration and construction of memory as well as the generation of future visions. They are also an extraordinary vehicle for communication, offering people from different generations and backgrounds a common ground to come together and remember, compare, interpret, and draw inspiration. Moreover, the photographs are an important source of material for promoting activities such as exhibitions, lectures, workshops, and consciousness-raising campaigns in the community. And given the rapid development of the digital technologies that facilitate the effective storage and transfer of images, the future possibilities for the use of historical photographs are even greater.

2. Looking Outwards

Attempts made by various indigenous communities to preserve their cultural heritage and promote the revival of their waning traditions have often faced obstacles because of the inability to capture the imagination and enthusiasm of the young. We must realize that these young people are, as is natural, intensely curious about the world and attracted to modern technology and popular culture. They enjoy watching music videos and playing computer games whenever available. They want to be up-to-date and “belong” to the contemporary global community. In this context, some of them perceive the knowledge and skills of their parents as increasingly inconsequential to the world of today, and they do not find many bridges linking the traditional and the modern.

Our experience was that simple technology can start to build such bridges. Through the use of photo and video cameras, tape-recorders, darkroom equipment, and a small computer, the students participating in this initiative gained access to new fascinating technologies, not only in a passive way, as simple spectators or consumers, but actively, by commanding the processes themselves. They used these tools discerningly, as an instrument to reclaim and preserve their endangered heritage, so that accessing the modern world and rediscovering their own past were both part of the same riveting experience. Used in this way, technology also offered older people, who are naturally suspicious of a modernity that usually robs them of the ability to control social change, the possibility to feel less the victims of unstoppable technological development and more confident in the possibility of selectively appropriating aspects of it in order to use them as part of their strategy to survive as a people.

Another window to the outside world was provided by books and other publications that offered a wider perspective on subjects relevant to the initiative’s focus. Through this literature, it was possible to enter a process of cultural comparison, to learn how other societies and cultural groups have dealt or are dealing with similar problems and questions: the role of architecture in asserting cultural identity, the preservation of historical monuments, the appropriate introduction of new materials and construction methods, the integration of traditional building practices with the modern building professions, the reconstruction of a habitat after displacement, and so on. The diversity of outside information also served to bring balance to a distorted and incomplete perception of modernity and its architectural and urban exploits, replacing it with a more critical view that included dissenting voices coming from the West, including those that extol the benefits of the vernacular architecture of traditional societies.

During the project, we also realized the importance of establishing and maintaining links with outside institutions and individuals who can become allies in the efforts to preserving the building tradition. A network of potential partners could include architecture faculties, museums,

historians, archaeologists, conservation professionals, and photo-researchers. These partners can play a beneficial role in the location of historical documentation and the transfer of skills and technical knowledge and, in the long term, cooperation in research and training can ensue. Moreover, through these relationships indigenous peoples soon understand not only that they can benefit from the outside world but that they have much to offer as well. Because they usually inhabit extreme and fragile ecosystems - deserts, mountains, rain forests, islands - indigenous peoples have developed unique building traditions and settlement practices that are well adapted to these environments. And as the modern world is compelled to search for more ecologically sensitive solutions in architecture, the building heritage of these societies increasingly gains in esteem and admiration. This type of realization will give rise to more egalitarian partnerships based on a coincidence of interests and mutual respect.

3. Traditional Values

When studying the old monuments, the young members of Nyampa Larso soon found that measuring and analysing the structures was not enough to fully understand them. The choice of site and orientation of the buildings, the use of colours and symbols, and the construction procedures themselves all seemed to obey rules set down by the spiritual tradition. Furthermore, practically all the architects of important structures appeared to have been religious practitioners. Therefore, the students invited a respected religious leader and scholar to visit their documentation centre. The high Lama spoke to them for a long time, associating the practice of architecture with the basic values, insights, and principles of Tibetan culture. He told them of the importance of understanding the act of creating physical forms and environments as belonging to a larger context, as part of the same process through which nature unfolds. He emphasized that a spiritual approach was essential not only for understanding their building tradition, but also for becoming responsible creators themselves. A way was being pointed in which the student's creative adventures and professional futures would not lead them away from tradition. On the contrary, they were being told that to become effective professionals and better serve their people, they could turn to the wisdom of their elders for inspiration and support.

As is the case with Tibetans, most indigenous peoples conceive creativity as strongly linked to spirituality, and in some societies, art is almost exclusively religious. Artists are often visionaries who have undergone dream-training and other techniques of the mind. Consequently, the buildings they create must also be understood as manifestations of diverse and profound experiences of the spirit. If one is involved in the study or the preservation of the architectural heritage of traditional societies, one cannot ignore this cultural aspect. A people who views impermanence and change as the intrinsic quality of reality, for example, might question the

motivation to preserve just the material substance of a building without considering the importance of the social or spiritual role this structure has in the community.