THF in the forefront of Lhasa historical buildings preservation - Part II

In the last issue of Space we introduced the Tibet Heritage Fund, a small independent non-government organisation working in Lhasa to preserve and renovate the surviving historic buildings in the old city centre. From small beginnings in 1996, the organisation has grown rapidly to employ 200 Tibetan workers and craftsmen and foreign experts, with funding provided by an increasing number of Western governments and charitable foundations.

In 1999, the largest project on which THF worked was the renovation of the Jokhang temple. This project was funded by the German Embassy in Beijing from its cultural preservation budget. Initially, monastery restoration was not planned by THF as it seemed there was more than enough work to do reclaiming the neglected residential buildings of Lhasa. With the overall situation in the old town markedly improved by the official preservation orders placed on the majority of the surviving historic houses in 1998, and following a growing number of requests from monastic communities, THF began to reconsider. After obtaining the necessary official permits from the Religious Affairs Department, it seemed natural to work on the site that is at the centre of the Qedeng conservation area.

Merunyingba was part of the block of six historic buildings surveyed and studied by volunteer students of the Department of Architecture, Chinese University of Hong Kong. In a rented hotel room in Lhasa, they produced floor plans, elevations and sections of Merunyingba and the other houses. It was necessary for the group to

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Merunyingba Monastery. Drawing by John Harrison, original survey by architecture students from CUHK.

get used to high altitude drawing, under less than ideal conditions. Carmen Tsui, one of the first group of students, recalls: "Our hotel room became our temporary studio. We used simple tools such as a small piece of roughly A3-size wooden paneling as a drawing board. It was my first time using a T-square for drafting in my six years of architectural studies. To withstand the boring drafting nights, we bought a small cheap Walkman, a pair of amplifiers and a few cassettes. Though the quality was extremely poor, it was the only entertainment we had in our studio."

Merunyingba is located in a little side-alley immediately to the east of the Jokhang temple at the heart of the old city. The large main building houses the monastery assembly hall, with a surrounding courtyard and the extensive two-storey galleries of the former monks’ quarters. The oldest part of the monastery is the Dzambalaba chapel on the west side of the courtyard, founded by the Tibetan king, Ralpachen, in the 820s, and now independently managed by Merusarba Monastery in Lhasa. Next to this chapel is said to be the rock that rose from the lake in which the Jokhang was built, and over it now on the upper floor is another chapel containing the Lhasa protector Palgon Dranji, maintained by Sakya-pa monks from Gonkar Monastery.

The present monastery buildings were erected in the seventeenth century by the Fifth Dalai Lama who made Merunyingba the Lhasa seat of the Nechung State Oracle, and so part of the Nechung and Drepung monasteries.

THF’s Arga-lady brigade laying a new Arga roof for Merunyingba Monastery, with the roofs of the Jokhang and the Potala Palace beyond.

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Cozy Palace Hotel, near an ancient building. The hotel has fine rooms.

Arga ladies beating a clay layer to create a waterproof surface. Wooden dance and sing traditional songs to maintain the regular rhythm. (photography 摄影: Francine Boisot)
The monastery escaped demolition during the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s, but was closed, stripped of valuable objects, and used as a stable. All the murals were painted over. The courtyard rooms were converted into public housing. After 1985, the two chapels and the main temple were permitted to return to religious use; the Merunyingba monks themselves restored their assembly hall and uncovered the hidden murals. After many years of neglect and decay, THF had to carry out major structural repairs. Settling beams were lifted back into position with hydraulic jacks, the rotted bases of wooden columns replaced, and repairs made to ceiling joists affected by leaks through the cement-patched flat roofs. The entire roof surface was renewed in Arga, the traditional waterproof clay covering. Internally, the electrical wiring was completely renewed and a solar-heated shower provided in a new bathroom. The courtyard buildings, which remained as public housing, were fully refurbished in consultation with the tenants.

In addition to the principal building crafts of masonry, carpentry and Arga roofing, at Merunyingba the more sophisticated nature of the building required the introduction of a number of other crafts that THF had not so far used in its house restoration projects.

The walls of Tibetan religious buildings are capped with a red band of pembe - branches of cut twigs bedded in mortar to form the outer face of the roof parapets. At Merunyingba much of the pembe had to be straightened by beating the outside face, or re-laid, and on the roof pavilion completely reconstructed. The pembe had to be brought from the mountains, laboriously trimmed to size and bound with strips of yak hide. Only Migmar, the 78-year old master builder, knew how to lay a corner correctly in pembe.

The outer face of the pembe had once been decorated with gilded brass ornaments, but only fragments of their wooden armatures remained. THF studied the remains and gained impressions in the face of the old pembe, compared the ornaments on the Jokhang temple and agreed suitable designs with the head lama, Tenzin. The designs were then beaten out.
of sheet brass and the completed ornaments gilded with gold leaf.

THF's silversmith, Jampa Tenda, made new door handles with convex bosses, and iron straps, decorated in filigree and silver inlay, for the main gates to the monastery. The massive wooden gates were repaired and covered with canvas for painting. THF went to Nechung Monastery, the principal seat of the Tibetan State Oracle, for the design of hanging animal skins, and this was then painted by Tsewang Dorje, who had studied with Amdo Jampa, a Tibetan painter famous in the 1950s. Tsewang Dorje and his apprentices also painted the two large gateway canopies, using traditional mineral paints, and he was then commissioned by THF to paint a new mural in the principal second floor room of the monastery, showing the Fifth Dalai Lama and his entourage.

Old wall paintings, which had been painted over in the 1960s, were found on the top floor of the monastery. Dr Uli Eltgen, the German painting conservator who spent seven weeks with THF in 1999, mostly working on the fifteenth-century paintings at Lho Talung Monastery in Southern Tibet, uncovered and stabilised these artworks. The richly carved and decorated capitals and beams in this pavilion were conserved, and a new chapel made with a statue of the fierce Nechung Oracle.