The Transformation of Leh Old Town: An Update

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Leh Old Town in Ladakh, in the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir, is an important historical settlement not only because of its geographical location on the west of the Tibetan plateau and its place in Ladakhi history, but also because of its architectural and cultural heritage value. With approximately 160 historic buildings and temples, it can be considered one of the best-preserved Himalayan settlements in existence today.

Ladakh occupied a strategic location on traditional trading routes until the 1960s, when the borders with Pakistan and China were closed. When Ladakh was reopened in 1974, tourism replaced the trading that the closing of the borders had ended. People who had land and could invest in the new industry moved out of the old walled city of Leh and built tourist facilities on nearby fields, and the city expanded rapidly across the valley. The original residential area below the Leh palace came to be known as Leh Old Town.

The residents who stayed behind did not have the financial means or skills to repair their houses and the Old Town fell into decay and neglect, a problem compounded by a lack of basic infrastructure and running water, as well as sewage and rubbish collection facilities in the area. In 2008, World Monuments Watch listed Leh Old Town as one of the 100 most endangered sites. When Tibet Heritage Fund (THF) founder André Alexander (1965–2012) visited Ladakh in 2003, he was struck by the architectural similarities with Lhasa and initiated a building and social survey of Leh Old Town, which revealed that many problems were indeed very similar to those in Lhasa. Alexander, together with local people, founded the Leh Old Town Initiative (LOTI), the local branch of THF, and started to work on the restoration and rehabilitation of the historic buildings, using a community-based conservation approach akin to the one THF had adopted in Lhasa (1996–2000) in cooperation with the Lhasa City Cultural Relics Office (www.tibetheritagefund.org/pages/projects/lhasa.php).

In 2006 THF/LOTI signed a Memorandum of Understanding, titled ‘Management, Rehabilitation and Conservation of Leh Heritage Zone’, with the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council (LAHDC) to work together for the conservation of Leh Old Town. The same year, THF/LOTI efforts were recognized in the UNESCO Asia-Pacific Heritage Awards for Cultural Heritage Conservation and the Leh Old Town Project was selected as a Best Practice in the Dubai International Award for Best Practices To Improve The Living Environment, presented by the Dubai Municipality and the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat).

Following the restoration of the 17th century Masjid Sharif mosque by THF/LOTI in collaboration with the Anjuman Moin-ul Islam Society and Intach J&K, in 2008 the Ministry of Tourism of Jammu and Kashmir invited Alexander to design and build a museum, to be known as the Central Asian Museum Leh. Traditional materials and techniques were used to build a structure that both suits the local cultural context and geographical setting and complies with environmental principles and values. The pre-opening took place in August 2011 (‘First Glimpse:
The Central Asian Museum Leh’, 2011. The museum complex was finished in October 2015.

With the completion of the museum, THF/LOTI continued to work to reverse the decay of the Old Town. It sought to prevent an India-wide government slum development project (known as the Rajiv Awas Yojana, or RAY, scheme) that would, in Leh Old Town, replace historic buildings with new 25-square-metre houses after it was officially declared a slum in 2012 (Alexander, de Azevedo and Hirako, 2015).

THF/LOTI also organized public meetings, symposia and discussions to promote conservation and to raise awareness of the value and importance of Leh’s architecture and heritage. As a result of these efforts, the slum development project was halted. However, with the poor state of the houses and the lack of basic infrastructure, the Old Town deteriorated even further.

One of the preservation strategies has been to target the most damaged historic buildings for rehabilitation and to improve the living conditions and infrastructure to attract people back to the Old Town. This approach aligns with the ‘Three Principles for the Preservation of Historical Buildings’—liveability, environment-cleanness and visible value—set forth by Masaru Maeno, an early advocate for making towns and settlements. In July 2015 THF/LOTI made a proposal to the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council (LAHDC), supported with maps and applicable regulations and guidelines for discussion, to declare Leh Old Town a heritage zone. All these efforts have shown stakeholders the importance of reviving Leh Old Town by making it liveable, clean and embodied with visible value, not only for the residents, but also for visitors.

Without a protected status with guidelines and regulations, however, its architecture and cultural heritage are still vulnerable. THF/LOTI, in collaboration with the LAHDC, developed a community-based conservation approach to Old Towns and settlements.

Selected bibliography


Pimpim de Azevedo is a Tibetan architecture conservator with a MRes in Heritage Sciences (UCL), and co-founded Tibet Heritage Fund with André Alexander in 1996. She was trained in traditional Tibetan architecture by master craftsmen in Lhasa and, together with Alexander, developed a community-based conservation approach to Old Towns and settlements.

Mrs Rigzin leads a weaving workshop in the summer kitchen of the Kushu house after its restoration. In this workshop, she introduces the different types of wool used in traditional weaving in Ladakh.