

PANEL 7 :

Heritage for people : poor communities in historic cities (Part 1)

The following report is a lightly edited transcript of the seventh panel discussion which took place during the Regional Gathering of Community Architects, which was organized by ACHR in Chiang Mai, June 12-16, 2010. This session was moderated by Mr. Supawit Boonmahathanakom ("Tee", a young Thai architect who now works with ACHR) and Mr. Thip Srisakulchairak (a lecturer in the architecture faculty of Arsom Silp University in Bangkok), and included presentations from the following places :

- **LHASA, TIBET** : This presentation was made by Mr. Andre Alexander. Andre is one of the founders of the Tibet Heritage Fund (THF), which since 1993 has been working with local Tibetan communities to help restore their traditional Tibetan dwellings, temples and monasteries and revive the traditional arts and building culture which went into making these beautiful buildings. They have worked in vulnerable old city core areas in Lhasa (in Tibet), in Leh (in India's Ladakh region), and several rural communities in Tibet and Mongolia. The THF team has also been involved in a long-standing project to try to preserve and renovate some of the city of Beijing's very last surviving traditional courtyard houses, in the old "hutong" neighborhoods north of the Forbidden City - with their low-income occupants still inside of them.
- **YUSHU, TIBET** : This presentation was made by Ms. Anna Wozniak. Anna is a young architect from Germany who has been working for the past couple of years with THF, and has been primarily involved in restoring a Tibetan house in the town of Yushu, in Tibet.
- **SOUTH GOBI PROVINCE, MONGOLIA** : This presentation was made by Ms. Pimpim de Azevedo. Pimpim comes from Portugal, and along with Andre, she was one of the founders of the THF in 1993. For the past year or two, she has been working in rural Mongolia to help restore a beautiful Tibetan monastery in a remote village - a process which has not only involved building restoration, but the revival of traditional crafts and the setting up of a kiln to manufacture elaborate roof tiles for the monastery roofs.
- **PATHAN, NEPAL** : This presentation was made by Mr. Surya Bhakta Sangachhe, a Nepali architect who works with the Pathan Conservation and Development Program (PCDP), in the city of Pathan, in the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal.

The theme for the discussions in panels 7 and 8 looked at ways groups in Asia are working to ensure that local communities - especially the poor and vulnerable ones - are involved in the preservation and conservation of the historic neighborhoods which still exist in their cities. The discussions looked at how to preserve not only the physical heritage of buildings and monuments, but also the traditions and cultures which go hand in hand with these buildings, such as the knowledge of local craftsmen and the persistence of traditional merchant and artisan cultures. While it is impossible to prevent new developments which pay little heed to vernacular building styles or local building materials, it is possible to combine conservation of historic city neighborhoods with development, making use of existing local assets.

Panel 7's discussion had a focus on the preservation and rehabilitation of houses and community buildings in Tibet, Mongolia, Ladakh and Nepal, which have much in common historically and culturally. The work of the Tibet Heritage Fund focuses on encouraging local communities to take part in restoring their houses, which are often neglected by conservationists in favor of monuments, using local craftsmen and traditional techniques. The case from Nepal demonstrates how local communities can be involved in restoration work with the support of local and national government. (Transcription by Diane Archer, ACHR)



1. Preserving local buildings AND local building skills in Tibet

Mr. Andre Alexander

This presentation was made by Mr. Andre Alexander. Andre is one of the founders of the Tibet Heritage Fund (THF), which since 1993 has been working with local Tibetan communities to help restore their traditional Tibetan dwellings, temples and monasteries and revive the traditional arts and building culture which went into making these beautiful buildings. They have worked in vulnerable old city core areas in Lhasa (in Tibet), in Leh (in India's Ladakh region), and several rural communities in Tibet and Mongolia. The THF team has also been involved in a long-standing project to try to preserve and renovate some of the city of Beijing's very last surviving traditional courtyard houses, in the old "hutong" neighborhoods north of the Forbidden City - with their low-income occupants still inside of them.



Andre : A historical painting shows how 1,300 years ago, the King and Queen watched over the building of a temple. From this we can assume that the Tibetans are proud of their building tradition, which they have held over a long time. The city of Lhasa has now grown around the temple, and historical photos show many vernacular buildings and typical Tibetan houses. Today, Lhasa does not look anything like that, and we have to look very hard to find any vernacular buildings at all, due to the changes that took place from the 1950s when the Chinese occupied Lhasa. In the 1960s they started a campaign to systematically destroy all evidence of the ancient culture, including entire buildings. This was not only a loss for architecture, but also of all the accumulated knowledge. From time to time the Tibetans voice their grievances, like in 2008 when they held major protests in Lhasa.



A map of the city will show that the historic old town is laid out like a spider's web. Here we can still see traditional flat-roofed, white-washed houses. However, in the 1990s there was another campaign to destroy more traditional buildings, including the state palace, and vernacular homes. The replacement buildings are of very low standard modern architecture, using pre-fabricated concrete slabs, and these buildings are inappropriate for Lhasa, for its climate and the risk of earthquakes - the concrete slabs will crush you. Just for the tourists, they try to build some shops in Tibetan style. So we can say that there are two visions of Lhasa: the official, Chinese part, with modern shopping malls and tall buildings, driven not only by ideology but by the greed for money. Then there is the traditional part, surrounded by trees, picnic spots, where everyone knows each other and there is no need for a car. These visions clash quite strongly.

In the early 1990s, some of us from THF decided we could do something, and it only took us three years of lobbying for the government to agree to let us restore a few houses. Once we had permission, we spent another year doing community surveys, getting a really good picture of the social situation of those who lived in these houses.

In our work we follow four principles :

1. **Bring time.** Time is such a wonderful ingredient if you can take it. Take your time, talk to everybody.
2. **All projects come from the community.** After the survey, we had meetings with the community, we told them that the government would allow us to upgrade some houses, but we didn't want to be the ones to choose. We discussed with the community how to upgrade their homes, and how to do it together.
3. **Don't trust the architect or the engineer, always trust the craftsmen first.** We don't like to work with contractors. We know the people have their own artisans, we see them in the paintings, and some of them are still alive. In 1961, traditional crafts were outlawed. For forty years there was a gap in transmission in knowledge about traditional crafts, but now these artisans are ready to come and out and start teaching their heritage.



4. **Don't trust drawings and plans like master plans, they are useless pieces of paper in which local people don't have a say.** All work is developed step by step with community people and craftsmen, and sometimes the architect helps with details.

To show an example from Lhasa : This is an old residential building, which was converted in the 1970s by the communist government into public housing for 17 families. It took us about one construction season, from April to October, to renovate it. And for the entire process, it was necessary to find out and revive many old technologies, from masonry to carpentry. To make the roof, the Tibetans stamp on it, to make it waterproof and it's very long lasting. It's important to teach the younger generation these skills, so we gave them stipends to come and work on our site. Now we have this big program in Lhasa, where we have up to 300 people learning skills, going to the countryside, learning from people there, and this is something that is spreading beyond Lhasa.



2. Using local skills to preserve a historic house in Yushu, Tibet

Ms. Anna Wozniak

This presentation was made by Ms. Anna Wozniak. Anna is a young volunteer architect from Germany who has been working for the past couple of years with THF, and has been primarily involved in restoring a Tibetan house in Yushu Town, in Tibet.



Anna : I have been a volunteer with THF for four years, and I have worked on the rehabilitation of the Gya Tshong Tsang house, in the outskirts of the Tibetan plateau in China. Yushu town is 3,500 meters above sea level, and was founded in the 12th century. However, in the last decade, many concrete high rise buildings have been built. The old town, however, is mostly mud structures, whereas the newer areas are concrete, high rise, and disregard the local context. So we came into this town in the hope of reviving the old buildings.

The house we restored in 2009 used to belong to a family that was involved in tea-trading between China and Tibet.

The house has a downstairs terrace which is the main living space for the family in the summer. For the restoration work we had skilled craftsmen from Lhasa and other areas, and we used local site managers, as well as a large local team. We worked strongly with the owner of the house.

The house is located on a slope, and before restoration, the whole house was slanting to one side, and there was a high variety of styles in the building. The building is a traditional structure, with a post-lintel structure enclosed by mud-brick walls, and the whole building is constructed with traditional earth building techniques: even the roof is of earth.

Because of the strong slant, we had to dismantle the whole upper story, taking down the roof. We numbered all the timber elements and stored them. All the earth piled in front of the building came from the roof, and it was all put back inside the building, using some water to bind the earth. So basically the building is completely constructed of natural materials and you could compost the whole building with no impact on the environment. Buildings made of earth are not necessarily dark and dusty, they form a very nice healthy living interior. The flooring is made of timber and the roofing is also made of wooden boards, so it's not dusty at all.



Above: the Gya Tshong Tsang House before restoration (left) and after the work was finished (right)

We applied small changes to the interior, working very closely with the owner before making any changes. We reworked the layout of the second floor as the rooms were very small and dark, and so we tried to enlarge the rooms, and we listened to the owner about how she wanted to use the building. On the ground floor, we opened up a whole room which is no longer used for tea storage, and the owner is planning to open a tea house on the ground floor, and also present the building to the public, with some pictures, to present the advantages of an old traditional house.



Traditional buildings stand up to earthquakes! On April 14th, 2010, there was a big earthquake which hit this town, with a magnitude of 7 on the Richter scale, and many buildings in the town were completely destroyed. Fortunately our building is still completely intact. As you can see, the surrounding buildings suffered severe damage, whereas we only suffered small cracks in the mud structure, which are very easy to repair.

So we hope this year to go back to Yushu, and that people will be more trusting of traditional buildings, which are best adapted to the local context and local environment, and that we can rehabilitate more buildings.

3. Reviving a community and a culture, through the restoration of its monastery

Ms. Pimpim de Azevedo

This presentation was made by Ms. Pimpim de Azevedo. Pimpim comes from Portugal, and along with Andre, she was one of the founders of the THF in 1993. For the past year or two, she has been working in rural Mongolia to help restore a beautiful Tibetan monastery in a remote village - a process which has not only involved building restoration, but the revival of traditional crafts and the setting up of a kiln to manufacture elaborate roof tiles for the monastery roofs.

Pimpim: Our project in Mongolia was to renovate the Sangiin Dalai monastery, located in Nomgun Sum, in the South Gobi desert, 700 kms from Ulaanbaatar. The site is located in the middle of nowhere, completely isolated.

According to information collected from the local people and the local former monk, there are only six of the original monastery's buildings left, as the others were destroyed in the 1930s by Russian soldiers. These six buildings show three characteristics: hybrid style, Chinese style and Tibetan style. The monastery was founded in 1772, and then extended 50 years later.

To do the restoration work, we started with an architectural survey, to assess the damage. Some of the problems of the building lie in the tiles and the bricks. There are two kinds of bricks used, mud bricks and blue bricks, which are very common in China. Many of the Tibetan style buildings suffered wood damage, because the roof beams collapse from the weight of the accumulated sand, which in the South Gobi can amount to seven centimeters of sand blown onto the roof in one season.



We also did an extensive social survey, and we found that there were three main problems:

- **People were leaving the town.** The monastery is in a small town with about 2000 inhabitants, and about 500 people moving in and out, who are students. Many of these 2000 people are leaving to the city, to find jobs, as there are no job opportunities here.
- **There is a lack of skills in building techniques.**
- **The materials were not available.** The only thing we can find locally is coal. So things need to be brought in from outside, and blue bricks are non-existent in Mongolia, so we decided to set up a brick factory.

We identified four families, and from these four families we chose people to work in a team. To work in a team is something very unusual in Mongolia - they are family orientated people, usually they work as a family.

To set up the brick kiln, we brought in an expert from China to explain all stages of setting up the kiln. We got other experts on making of tiles and bricks to come, who also explained how to choose the right materials, and how to mix the mud, which requires a special technique. The local carpenters made the molds for the bricks. The bricks have to be dried for seven days, then fired for seven days and eight nights. This is a very difficult process so we always focus on training the local people so that they can continue the process themselves.

Then we needed to train people in carpentry, because their carpentry skills were poor, since most Mongolians live in gers (the round, wool-lined tent structures which are the traditional dwellings of Mongolia's nomadic herdsmen) and therefore don't build houses. So we invited a German carpenter to train them in structural

carpentry. There were many symbols destroyed by the army, and one of these was the gabled roof, which we had to rebuild. One of the Mongolian carpenters made a model of how to assemble the roof, and for this he got a diploma from the local university. From China we brought in some experts on how to do the tiles for the roofing.

One of the ladies who participated became a local hero, and she got an award, from the Mayor of the town for participation in the project. Without the community participation we would never have managed to do this project. Another interesting thing is that as time went on, the Mayor started sending us teams from the village, for heavy work, to shovel the path, then he would send the doctors and nurses, then the teachers, then the office employees, to observe our process.

The official opening ceremony was the first religious celebration in the monastery after 80 years, since they closed it in the 1930s. The highest Lama of Mongolia came to consecrate it, and everyone was very moved, because they had the chance to see the monastery back to life again.



4. Preserving local building skills and local buildings in Leh, Ladakh (India)

Mr. Andre Alexander

This presentation was also made by Mr. Andre Alexander, one of the founders of the Tibet Heritage Fund (THF), which since 1993 has been working with local Tibetan communities to help restore their traditional Tibetan dwellings, temples and monasteries and revive the traditional arts and building culture which went into making these beautiful buildings. In the last few years, they have been working with communities and the local government in the old town of Leh, in the Ladakh region of northern India (another traditionally Tibetan Buddhist place) to restore some of the old houses and the crumbling infrastructure in this fairy-tale city in the Himalayas.

Andre : This process we are implementing in Ladakh is supported by ACCA. We have two programs there: co-



financing for housing, and building community drains. Ladakh is in India but shares cultural and social traits with Tibet, though it also has its own indigenous culture and traditions, like local dress. The palace of the Kings of Ladakh is now a national monument of India, made of mud timber and bricks, and is 300 years old. The old town is located below the palace, consisting of about 400 houses also built of timber of stone. But it's a very hard place to live, there is no water, very little drainage, you have to walk steeply uphill to cut trees, and only the poor families remain in that area today, all those who have money have moved out.



So again we started with a community survey, and we talked with everyone, and we found out that 50% of the people who live in the old part of town live below the official Indian poverty line and half the buildings are in very poor condition. There are only 5 water taps so people wait for 45 minutes in the morning for water, but they all know each other so there are no fights.

We started with a demonstration project, in a tiny local temple, to show that we were there to encourage traditional construction techniques. After the temple project, we had a meeting with the local people to say that we would pay 50% for the repair of their houses, if they would pay the other 50%. And many agreed to this. Of course some families are too poor to even finance 50%, but we are flexible, as long as they make some sort of contribution, providing labor or making mud bricks, for example.

We found that we could use any old soil to make these mud bricks, adding a little bit of straw to make them stronger. For some buildings we used Tibetan style stone masonry, but stone is already much more expensive, so mud bricks is for cheap affordable housing. We also used timber, as it grows very fast here, in 8 to 10 years, and almost everyone has family or friends who grow some of this timber, for construction purposes. We found there is an extensive social and family network across Ladakh, all Ladakhis are somehow related to each other, and they can ask their family to give them some trees. The timber is used for columns and secondary beams, and we use sticks or firewood to make the roof, over which is placed dried grass, and then different levels of soil and clay. So these are all materials that can be found cheaply. Then the parapets are made with a mixture of donkey dung to make them more resistant to the weather.

We had a little workshop in Ladakh to explore how the Ladakhis are prepared for earthquakes, for example the palace has survived for 300 years, and we found that the palace walls have timber brackets, and the walls are 1 meter thick on the ground floor, providing space for these brackets. So we copied this: after we put the timber in we filled in the spaces with mud. People brought their own traditional tools, they have no electrical tools, which would not be very useful anyway as there is almost no electricity. The people also built community drains.



When we talk about conservation, we like to conserve local communities, to have living cities. We don't help people who want to turn houses into guesthouses or boutiques. And we also want to revive and conserve building techniques. With regard to housing it's not so much conservation as rehabilitation. We try to encourage participation of inhabitants and we have a focus on livability. Lastly, compromise and negotiations are what we spend most time on every day.

I would like to thank all our volunteers on our projects, including four students from Chiang Mai university who visited us last year.

Comment from Tee : We learned from your story many things. Conservation is not only building conservation, but it goes beyond that, it is transmission of local wisdom, and conservation is concerned with the people and the risk of disaster. Like the Chang Chumchon ("community builders" network in Thailand), the THF have the local craftsmen.

5. Restoring the ancient city of Pathan, in Nepal

Mr. Surya Bhakta Sangachhe

This presentation was made by Mr. Surya Bhakta Sangachhe, a Nepali architect who works with the Pathan Conservation and Development Program (PCDP), in the city of Pathan, in the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal. Mr. Surya Bhakta Sangachhe: Pathan Conservation and Development Project, Nepal

Surya : My focus is on Pathan city, located in Kathmandu Valley. I used to work as a member of the Pathan Conservation Development Program, and I was posted to work there in the early 1990s, as the town controller. This Pathan Conservation and Development Project (PCDP) is a joint program with the government of Germany, through the GTZ. The principles of PCDP are promotion of self-help and ownership - the program is owned by the people, not owned by the German government. The project builds upon the Bharatpur Development Project, which was initiated in 1992. It is an attempt to reconcile conservation and development of the town, through capacity building with on-the-job training and knowledge transfer. We are phasing out the Urban Development by Local Efforts (UDLE) support by the gradual shifting of responsibility to local partners and organizations.



Pathan is one of the oldest towns in the valley, over 2000 years old, and it has many monuments. The aim of the project is to safeguard the local culture of Pathan in the context of urban development, through the use of pilot projects, documentation, emergency repair of local monuments, building control, action plans and programs, integrated neighborhood improvement programs, and institutional support for local capacity building. The action plan was prepared by surveying with the local community: we went into all the neighborhoods and asked what the problems were: drainage and solid waste management came up. From this we created a multi-investment plan with funding from different sources, from the government and NGOs.

The pilot project was the restoration of the Chyusal Chapas community buildings, which are used for community meetings, marriage ceremonies, and community gatherings. These two

community buildings are built in the traditional Nepali manner. We used local materials, local craftsmen, and hundreds of volunteers to restore this building. In 2003, 500 residents, young and old, came together as volunteers, to re-tile the roof of the second community building. The tiles were passed hand by hand, washed, and then laid by the local craftsmen. After the day's work was done, everyone took part in a large feast, which was being prepared during the day. And now the project belongs to the community - people can pay a small contribution to use the center.

Technical assistance came from GTZ, which supported 45% of the costs of the larger Chyusal Chapas community center, while the local government provided 8%, and the local community contributed 57%. The smaller community center was restored in 2003, with GTZ financing 33%, the local government 1%, and the local community 66%. It was possible to save almost 40% of the total cost by working with the local community. This is in comparison to the Bharatpur Project, in which the local community was not involved.



QUESTION from Andre: Were there any conflicts, for example between you and the craftsmen? (*Surya responds*) Not between us and the craftsmen, because we didn't ask for things which were impossible. Conflicts were more between us (the architects and craftsmen) and the local residents, who sometimes have unreasonable demands, so we have to try and reach compromise, and rely on trust.

QUESTION : If locals do not value local heritage, then what is the role of the architect? (*Andre responds*) Architects can inspire both the craftsmen and residents, for example by using traditional skills to create new spaces and components. Our role is to inspire. (*and Surya adds*) In Nepal, the people wanted to use new construction styles. We as architects had to convince them of the validity of local styles and traditional materials, the identity of the locality.

QUESTION from Kirtee Shah : Your work is very inspiring and heroic. But I have one important question. Time is of the essence. The rate at which destruction happens is unbelievable. So it is very important that scaling up happens and we need more teams like yours - not just one Andre! So what are you doing for this scaling up happens? (*Andre responds*) You have to accept loss. You can only do so much. I am suspicious of scaling up and replicating - it is better to develop your own ideas and approach. But also we must work with local universities to share our experiences and methods.

Preserving historic structures and historic neighborhoods so that the people who live their don't get pushed out . . .

(*comments by Andre*) Groups like UNESCO and so on don't give money to poor local people. We like to keep the locals in place. The impact of too much conservation is that low income people get pushed out, as property prices rise. Also, preservationists pick out monuments and big houses to renovate, not the homes of ordinary residents which are not so grandiose. We have a plan to launch a program to help these people in Luang Prabang, to upgrade their houses, so that they can participate in being a UNESCO World Heritage Site and continue to live there, as they have every right to do so.

