

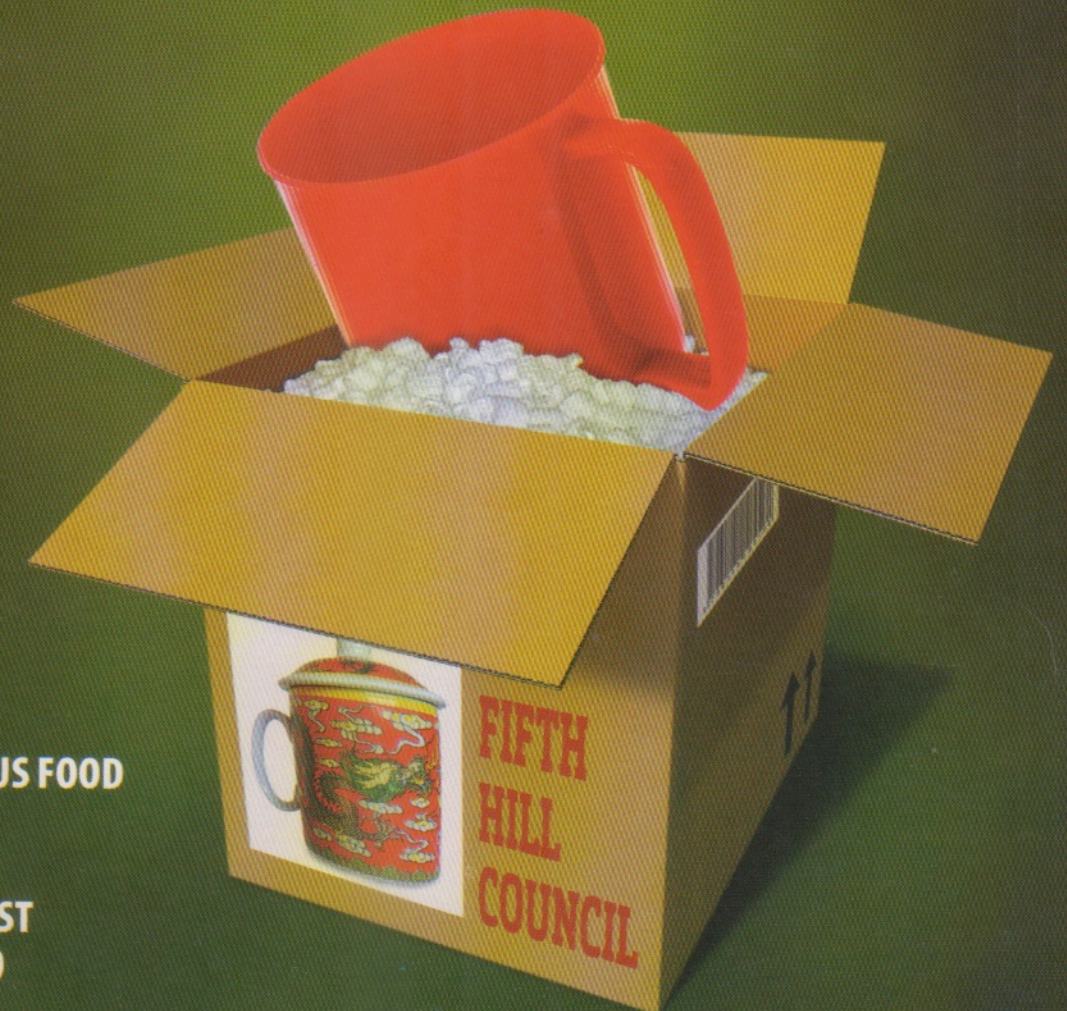
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₹ 40

VOL. 2 - ISSUE 11 - NOVEMBER 2015

LAHDC, Leh elections 2015

New packaging for the same politics?



TREASURES IN OUR
BACKYARDS: PRECIOUS FOOD
OR PESTS?

THE UNIQUE BUDDHIST
MANDALA IN SKARDO

Cover Design: Raul Chhokkun

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Stawa or Ltawa (ལྗང་ལྗང་།) translates as 'perspective' or 'point of view'. This reflects the fundamental principle on which this publication functions. It aspires to be a platform where different points of view can be expressed and substantiated in an effort to hold meaningful dialogues on different issues.

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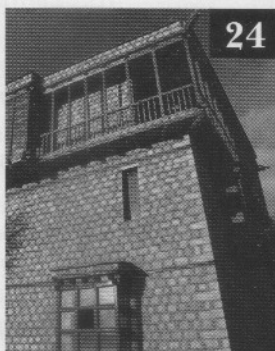
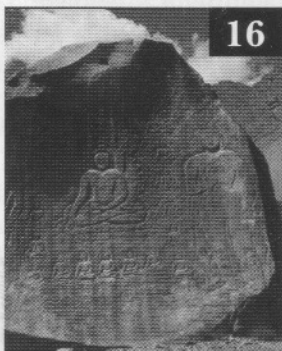
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Leh's Central Asian Museum: Integrating heritage with modernity

By Pimpim de Azevedo and Yutaka Hirako

For centuries, Ladakh has been at the crossroads of Central Asian caravan trade. Its culture has been shaped by the goods and ideas exchanged between Tibet, Turkestan, Kashmir and India. Political developments in the mid-20th century put an end to the cross-border trade and relegated Ladakh to relative geographic and cultural isolation. The Central Asian Museum, Leh is an ode to this aspect of Ladakh's heritage, while also helping educate people about it. It is built in Tsas-Soma ('new garden'), which in the past also hosted one of Leh's serais. Masjid Sharif, Leh's first mosque, is said to have been established here in the 17th century.

The NGO Tibet Heritage Fund (THF) restored this mosque in collaboration with the Anjuman Moin-ul Islam society in 2007. Around this time, the idea of such a museum was expressed by former director of Jammu and Kashmir Tourism, Saleem Beg and eminent Ladakhi historian, Abdul Ghani Sheikh. The Anjuman Moin-ul Islam supported the idea and provided land for it.

■ Pimpim de Azevedo is a conservator of Tibetan architecture, with a Master of Research degree in Heritage Sciences. She co-founded Tibet Heritage Fund with André Alexander in 1996 and is currently its co-director.

Yutaka Hirako is a Japanese architect who worked with Tibet Heritage Fund in China from 1998 and since 2012 has been working in Ladakh. He is programme director at THF and Leh Old Town Initiative.

Yutaka Hirako/THF



The main building of the museum

A committee was formed to operate the museum and later registered as the Society for the Preservation of Trans-Himalayan Art and Culture, with Abdul Ghani Sheikh as its president. THF and Leh Old Town Initiative (LOTI) were asked to design and build the museum. The project was supported by the Jammu and Kashmir Department of Culture and Tourism with funding of ₹1.02 crores (₹10.2 million), of which ₹89.6 lakhs (₹8.96 million) was used in the construction of the museum. In addition, THF's sponsors Virginia and Wellington Yee, Maximillian Ma, HowMan Wong, Rubin Foundation and Embassy of Finland, New Delhi contributed ₹1.01 crores (₹10.1 million). A total of ₹1.906 crores (₹19.06 million) was used to construct the building of the Central Asian Museum. The balance of ₹32.4 lakhs (₹3.24 million) has been allocated for the purchase of artefacts and to pay relevant taxes. The construction of the museum started in August 2008 and was completed in October 2015, with work proceeding only between

April and October in the intervening years. At present, the museum is open for visitors who can admire the architecture of its building.

The main building was conceived and designed by the late André Alexander along with the Habitat Unit of the School of Architecture at Berlin University of Technology and vital inputs from local artisans and international volunteers. The museum is built to resemble a Himalayan fortress tower with some contemporary design elements. The square ground plan and diamond-shaped ceilings echo ancient Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim places of worship. Each floor is encircled by a passage leading to a stairway to the next floor. Each floor has a different interior design to reflect Ladakhi, Kashmiri, Tibetan and Balti influences.

The ground floor ceiling and timber elements are crafted in an ancient Ladakhi style, inspired by the Tsemo fortress in Leh. The first floor is designed in an early Kashmir style, with Bactrian fluted columns to reflect those found

in one of the older mosques in Srinagar. The second floor is designed in a classical Tibetan style, with timber elements and carvings echoing those seen in the homes of Lhasa's aristocracy. The top floor is decorated in a Balti style with long elegant pillar capitals and flower-pattern carvings.

The museum has been built

slate for waterproofing. The windows, however, are a more modern innovation and unusual for Ladakh. They are tall and narrow and placed asymmetrically along the facades. The main door echoes the gates of mansions in old Leh town. Many historic elements were donated by local community members and have been

an eco-friendly filter system, and one Ladakhi dry toilet.

The upper floor of this building has three separate entrances; two from the garden and one from Chhutey rantak. It includes administrative offices, storerooms for artefacts, a multi-functional space, two toilets—a flushing-style toilet and a dry Ladakhi toilet—and

Yusuf Hira/THF



The diamond ceiling allows natural light through all the floors.

Yusuf Hira/THF



View of Tsas-Soma with Ladakhi kitchen and Kashmiri-style gate.

with traditional Ladakhi construction materials, including stone, timber and mud. Each aspect of the construction is done by hand; each stone was individually dressed by masons and the wood-carving was done on site. The walls of the museum are built in solid stone masonry with mud mortar. The style of the masonry and individually faced stones embedded in layers of splinter stones are identical to the one used in Lhasa and also seen in the remains of Gandhara monuments. The stones are local granite, quarried from Shey village. The local mud mortar used was prepared with a mix of soil, water and *markalak* (white clay). In Tibetan architecture, the embedding or 'braiding' of large stones with small ones lends flexibility to the walls to withstand tremors. The floors are paved with slate stone, which were traditionally used for monastic courtyards. The ceilings are constructed in traditional Ladakhi style with *tal* (willow twigs). The Himalayan flat roof has traditional mud layers with a layer of

integrated into the building. This includes three lintels, carved with Buddhist and Islamic floral patterns as well as two dozen historic windows, many of them decorated with Kashmiri tracery.

The location of the museum is of great significance. Many of the other buildings around the garden have been integrated with the museum complex. Above the Chhutey rantak entrance is the Trans-Himalayan Research Library. The Masjid Sharif is just north of the library, followed by the Kashmir bakery building. This building has been re-designed to be a part of the museum complex. The bakers will continue using the ground floor of this building facing Chhutey rantak, while the museum restaurant will be located at the rear and serve food in Tsas-Soma during summers. This restaurant and the Ladakhi kitchen museum, on the other side of the garden, will generate resources for the museum. The ground floor of this building also has three public toilets—two flush-type, which are fitted with

a reception space. This building has also been designed to reflect different cultural influences, especially wood construction elements, carvings and designs, and echoes the museum's main building.

The museum complex can be accessed by three gates: the Chhutey rantak entrance is currently the main entrance, a second entrance is located on the southern side and leads to a small alley facing the main bazaar and the third entrance is located on the north of Tsas-Soma.

The completion ceremony for the Central Asian Museum took place on 7 October with Mr. Saleem Beg as the chief guest and attended by community leaders, scholars and others. Now starts the work of collecting artefacts for display at the museum, which will be done by the Society for the Preservation of Trans-Himalayan Art and Culture. We hope that the museum plays an important role in the cultural life of the region and promotes understanding, tolerance and cultural diversity. ■