

# 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 opened for tourism in 1974, it 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



Designed and built by André Alexander, the Central Asian Museum Leh is a landmark of modern architecture in Ladakh and the Himalayas.



The Kushu (left) and Dzomskit houses after repair, with the Leh palace in the background

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](http://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:

In the summer kitchen on the top floor of the Kushu house, architect Yutaka Hirako (centre) participates in a religious ceremony before commencing repair work.



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.

One of the preservation strategies of THF 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-cleanliness and visible value—set forth by Masaru Maeno, an early advocate for conservation and the head of the Japanese chapter of UNESCO's advisory body, ICOMOS (Alexander, 2007, p. 23).

A key step in preserving Leh's vernacular architecture and living heritage is to demonstrate that it is possible to adapt traditional houses using modern principles and to retain their charm and

characteristics by preserving the facades, windows, doors, kitchens, clay stoves and so on using appropriate materials and techniques. This accords with the principle of liveability. With the provision of basic infrastructure, improvements to public spaces and a clean environment, people are more likely to stay than to move out, and when residents understand that their houses have visible value, they will be more motivated to maintain them.

The Dzomskit ('Happy Gathering'), Kushu ('Apple') and Onpo ('Astrologer's') houses in the Kharyok ('below the palace') cluster in the Old Town are examples of such an approach in action. All were in a dangerous condition. The house owners contacted THF/LOTI for help, and THF's architect Yutaka Hirako took up the challenge of restoring the three houses between 2015 and 2017. His approach was to preserve as much of their historical fabric as possible while improving facilities for the residents. The construction of skylights and light wells brought natural light into the rooms on the top and middle floors. Each house was fitted with a toilet and washroom, and electrical cables were concealed inside the walls. Since the Kushu house was slated to become a heritage showcase, a modern kitchen was installed to show the other owners how this could be done.

The restoration of these three houses has inspired other owners to maintain their houses in the long term. Because of the high quality of the work, people are coming to see the houses from other

parts of Ladakh. Promisingly, they are attracting the attention of the younger generation. The Ladakh Alliance Française has rented the top floor of the Dzomskit house. Young Ladakhis go there to study and use the library and other facilities every day and are getting to know the neighbourhood. A group of young Ladakhi artists has rented the Onpo house as a studio. The Kushu house, meanwhile, serves both as a showcase of modern amenities in a traditional house and as a cultural centre. It hosts a monthly series of talks, 'Early Memories of Leh Old Town', in which guest speakers are invited to share their childhood memories with the public. These talks are recorded and broadcast on the local radio station.

Other strategies THF/LOTI has used in the Old Town include minor house repairs and water and sanitation projects, which have an immediate impact on the well-being of the residents and community. 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. In July 2018, THF/LOTI made a proposal to the LAHDC, supported with maps and applicable regulations and guidelines for discussion, to declare Leh Old Town a heritage zone. In August the deputy commissioner of the LADHC, Avny Lavasa, organized a meeting to

discuss this proposal with relevant government departments, scholars, NGOs and members of the community. As a result, a Heritage Management Committee was created and it was decided to organize a public discussion in the near future on the establishment of a heritage zone and related guidelines. The nomination of Leh Old Town as a heritage zone, together with the restoration and rehabilitation projects, will bring hope for the historic town of Leh, which could serve as a conservation and rehabilitation model for other towns and settlements.

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#### Selected bibliography

- André Alexander, *Towards a Management Plan for the Old Town of Leh*, Berlin, 2007.
- , Pimpim de Azevedo and Yutaka Hirako, 'Standing at a Crossroads: The Struggle to Preserve Leh Old Town', *Orientations*, September 2015, pp. 140–42.
- 'First Glimpse: The Central Asian Museum Leh', *Orientations*, October 2011, p. 94.



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.