



The gilded spire of Jebum-gang Lha-khang has been a prominent landmark in old Lhasa. Seen here are the southern and eastern elevations, behind the residential building of the Gyumé Tantric college monks (1940s, courtesy of the late Hugh Richardson).

12 | Jebum-gang Lha-khang

Perfect Mandala in Imperfect Condition

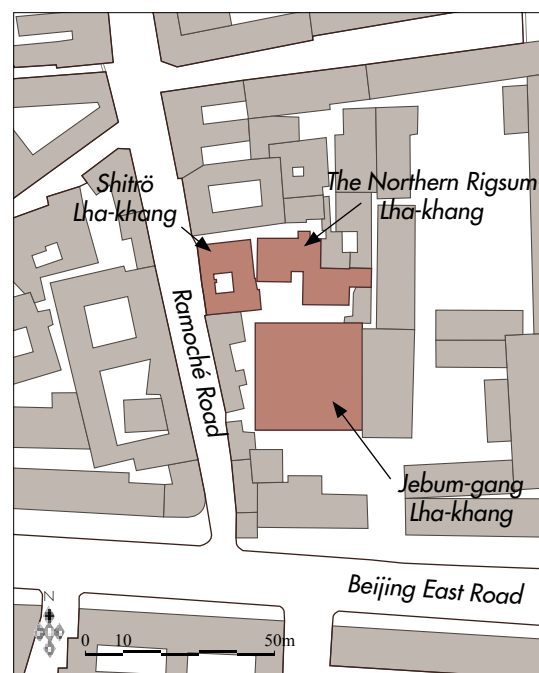


Jebum-gang, north elevation, showing the corrugated-iron roofed office of the Lhasa Grain Department and the blocked north gate (1995 AA).

Site Introduction

In 1993, a curious marking on the map of Lhasa compiled by Peter Aufschnaiter in 1948 led us to a busy corner at the lower end of Ramoché Road. A seemingly deserted square building, described as a functioning monastery half a century ago, stood in the middle of a construction site. It was not possible to enter. The only visible entrance was walled up, and a public toilet was being built in front. By the next year, the building was hidden behind new apartment blocks, except for a narrow section that could be glimpsed from the women's entrance to the public toilet. Another attempt to enter the building in 1995 was likewise unsuccessful, but it revealed the existence of murals in the entrance section and in the interior, including a glimpse of a painted Guru Rinpoché through the rear-side window. Success came when the current owners, the Lhasa Grain Department, consented to a visit, interested in suggestions regarding conservation of the site. More visits followed in our official capacity as Lhasa Old City Protection Working Group members.

Location map (2000 KO+AA).



Jebum-gang Lha-khang, original condition and setting, with chörten in the front and residential building in the back (detail of tangka, mineral painting on cloth, late 19th or early 20th century, G.V. Essen collection, reproduced with kind permission of the copyright holder, Museum der Kulturen Basel).



Above: West elevation, facing Ramoché Road (1991 AA).

Right: West elevation, showing the turrets, roof chapels and spires (ca. 1916, glassplate collection T. Wild).



Site Description

The Jebum-gang chapel, once a landmark of central Lhasa, is today obscured from sight by modern development. Of the previous four entrance gates in the four directions, all except one are blocked. The only access is through the gate of the compound of the Tsampa Lé-khung (a unit of the Lhasa City Grain Department) on Beijing East Road. The building is still used to store *tsampa* (roasted barley flour, a Tibetan staple food), and scales for individual retail are kept in the south portico. It is a square building measuring 28.30 meters on every side.



In 1993, the west elevation was permanently blocked by the construction of a public toilet and housing blocks (1993 AA).



The east elevation was permanently blocked in the 1970s by the construction of a corrugated-iron storage hall (1996 AA).

Site History

The name comes from 100,000 ('*bum*) clay mold figures (*tsa-tsa*) of Jé Tsongkapa that were once contained in a great *chörten* (*mchod rten*, *stupa*) on this spot, known as the ridge (*sgang*) of Gyabum. When the *chörten* collapsed, it was decided to build a temple to house the clay figures.¹ The Jebum-gang Lha-khang was built in the last decade of the 19th century by the then-regent of Tibet, the Ninth Demo Rinpoché, Ngawang Lobsang Trinlé Rabgyé, as something far more ambitious than a mere *tsa-khang*.² It was a three-story architectural *mandala* of a type common in the Nyingma-pa tradition. Demo Rinpoché stood down when the Thirteenth Dalai Lama came of age in 1895, but was subsequently implicated in a treason that led to his disgrace and early death.³

The temple was subsequently restored and embellished by the Thirteenth Dalai Lama's government, and entrusted to the Potala's Namgyel Dra-tsang, which deputed caretaker monks. It was ransacked in 1959 and eventually used as a godown.



The only accessible entrance is the south gate, regularly used by the Grain Department. A second office room has been added above the portico (1996 AA).



The original south gate within the south portico, the door panels have been painted with the Chinese character *cang* (storage) on uniform brown background (1996 AA).



The north elevation faces the former service building and the North Rigsum Lha-khang. The portico has been walled in and a modern door added, usually blocked (1996 AA).

The Jebum-gang Lha-khang was modelled conceptually on the Samyé U-tsé. It has four symmetric sides, four entrance gates from the cardinal directions, and two interior devotional passageways surrounding the inner *sanctum*. The three vertical sections represent the three cosmic realms, or the three levels of manifest reality. Only the ground floor survives. Fortunately there is a written account of the foundation, which tells us something of the original conception and layout (see appended translation).

Site Survey

The four gates:

The west gate originally faced Ramoché Road and the *mani* stone wall and *chörten* at its south end, destroyed after 1959. Housing and a public toilet constructed in 1993 permanently block the gate.

The north gate faces a courtyard in which a former service building still stands. Behind the courtyard are the former Shitrö Lha-khang and the functioning North



Jebum-gang Lha-khang, 3-D model of original condition based on site surveys and photographs (2004 KO).



The south portico is used to weigh grain. On both sides are doorways leading to the other ambulatory passage. The 19th century murals are in reasonable condition but in need of some conservation work. Behind the scale is a depiction of Palden Lhamo riding on a horse (1996 AA).

Rigsum Lha-khang. The north gate is walled except for a slim modern door that is apparently rarely used, judging from the amount of litter obstructing it.

The east gate is permanently blocked by a 1960s building with pitched tin roof, and could not be investigated.

The south gate is partly walled in, leaving a central doorway that is still in use.

One of the four guardian kings carved in stone has survived. Presumably there were free-standing stone images of the guardian kings of the four directions at each of the four gates, but we were unable to confirm this. All four entrance porticoes are flanked by two multi-corner-shaped pillars, the capitals decorated with carved figures (*'dzi par*) of exceptional quality.

The beams above the porticoes are carved with writing in the *lentsa* ornamental script, commonly used for calligraphic renderings of *mantra* and short prayers.

The stonework of the outer walls is of fine quality.

We entered the building through the south gate. Behind the modern door lies the traditional portico, where the original mural decorations are still preserved, if a bit weathered. They had once been overpainted and then were uncovered again more recently. The wall to the right of the gate shows the wrathful form of Palden Lhamo riding on her horse. Oil drums stored here block the doors to the ambulatory passage. The two-winged gate to the interior is still original, with metal door-knockers and the ornamental *pema-chudzö* frame, but everything has been painted over with brown color. The Chinese character *cang* written on the left door-wing denotes a storage space.

The internal ambulatory passage leads around the entire building through all four entrance porticoes. It is pillarless, just a bit over two meters wide (described as half-a-pillar span in the translated account) and covered in litter, among them the chain mail curtains of the central chapel. The passage is still covered in murals, but they have been damaged by leakage and perhaps earlier over-painting. Among the identified murals is a depiction of the Rigsum Gonpo and a form of Guru Rinpoché on the northern section. Because there are no pillars, the beams in the corners are diagonal in position to support the ceiling. A series of eight doorways along the ambulatory connects to the entrance porticoes and creates four separate passageways, lit by windows most of which are now blocked. The passageway doors have decorated door frames with the standard *pema-chudzö* decoration. We could not walk the inner circumambulation in full because several of the doors were locked.

On each of the cardinal sides is a two-winged gate to the interior, flanked every time by a painting of one of the four guardian kings, as well as images of protectors.

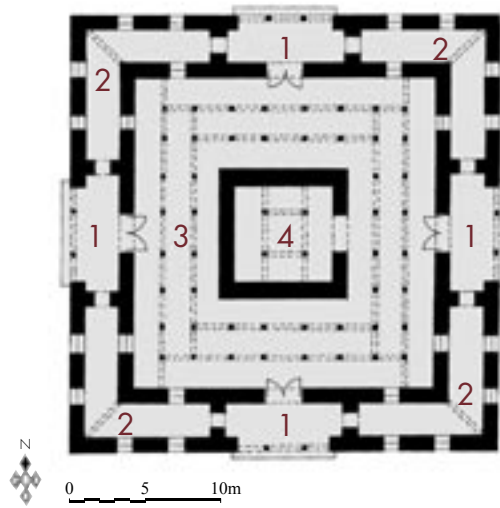
The interior is a dimly lit square room with 48 pillars, with a 4-pillar *sanctum* in the center. The walls are covered with murals showing identical arrangements of small and large *chörten* with Vajrapani in the dome. Bags of *tsampa* block some of the walls. The pillars and beams are in classical style and color schemes (red, blue, gilded yellow). The beams are decorated with gilded *lentsa* writing. The medallions once attached to the center of the bracket capitals, carved images (presumably *'dzi par*) with blessings underneath, have been removed. The ceiling is in the Lhasa style of finely squared rafters (*steng sgrigs*). No trace remains of the stairway access to the upper floor.



The interior main hall is largely filled with sacks of barley. The timber elements have retained some of their painted and carved decorations, but the medallions in the center of the bracket-capitals have been stripped. The various door protector images (Hayagriva and Bhurkumkuta by the east door, Vajra-vidarana by the south door, Mahottara-heruka by the west door, and by the north door Amrtakundalin) are gone. The murals are in good condition (1996 AA).



The ambulatory passage is no longer in use and is littered with garbage; the western portion is shown here (1996 AA).



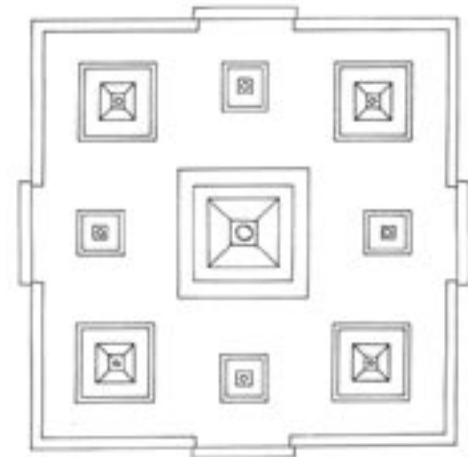
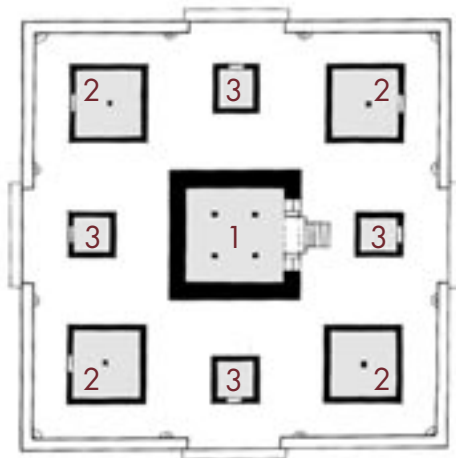
Plan, level 1

- 1 entrance porticoes
- 2 ambulatory passage
- 3 main hall
- 4 sanctum

(MW/AA)

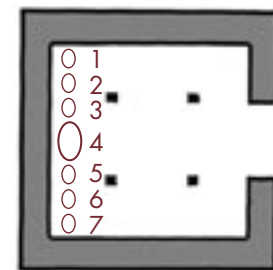
Below: plan of the original condition of level 2 and roof, based on roof measurements and historic photos, revealing the original mandalic setup (AA).

- 1 U-tse Tagsum chapel
- 2 chapels with images of the Four Guardian Kings
- 3 turrets



Plan of original iconographic setup of ground-floor sanctum

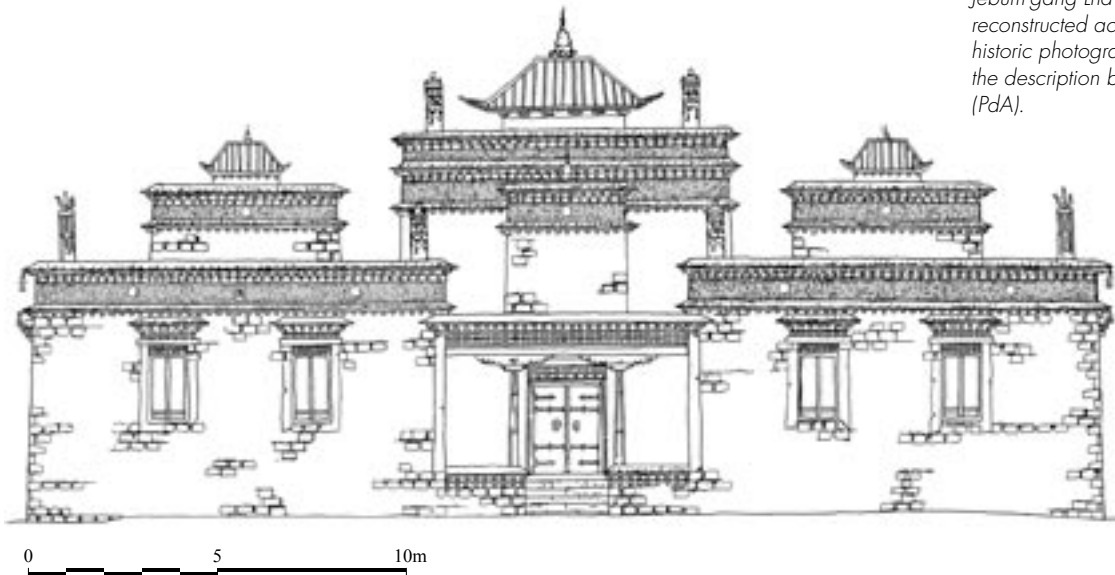
'There were four turrets (lcog), one on each side of the first floor. The east-facing chapel in the center was adorned by two staircases leading up to the canopy roof and spire of the five qualities (of the Dharmadhatu-mandala) united in one. At the four corners were canopies of white lead with gilt copper spires. Even the outside of the ground floor was decorated with exquisite ornaments like jewelled lotuses and so on, as befits a chamber of the gods. It was a perfect marvel, like the palace of Indra fallen to earth, a place revered by the wise.' Excerpted from the official biography of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama, Lhasa edition, see appended translation by M. Akester



- 1 Fifth Dalai Lama
- 2 Songtsen Gampo
- 3 Dipankara
- 4 Maitreya
- 5 Sakyamuni
- 6 Sitadhvajapatra
- 7 Jé Tsongkapa

(AA)

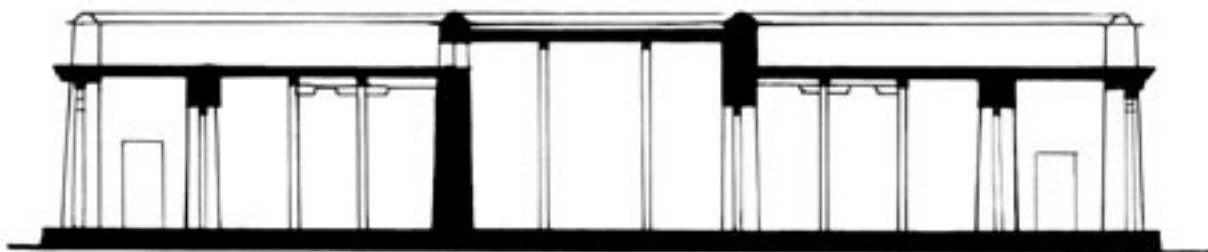
Jebum-gang Lha-khang, west elevation, reconstructed according to site measurements, historic photographs and wall-paintings, and the description by the Thirteenth Dalai Lama (PdA).



West elevation, present condition (W/MW/AA).



West-east section, present condition (MW).





Top: eastern section of the hall, showing the sanctum entrance (1996 AA).

Right: mural in the ambulatory passage, showing Geluk-pa lamas (1996 AA).

Far right: Mural in the ambulatory passage, showing the Rigsum Gonpo protectors. This image, like many in the ambulatory, is threatened by roof leakage (1996 AA).



Surviving stone image of Guardian King of the North, Namtö-sé (1996 AA).

The inner *sanctum* is built with solid stone walls. The entrance faces east, and is decorated with *pemachudzö* frame and a row of five lion heads carved out of wood, two of which are damaged. The *sanctum* has four raised pillars (*byar ka*) and a skylight consisting of two rectangular windows. The room is empty apart from a few bags of *tsampa* and oil drums. Entirely missing are the religious images originally enshrined here. Marks on the walls still tell of their position. Traces of wall-paintings remain, in particular faded images of protectors.

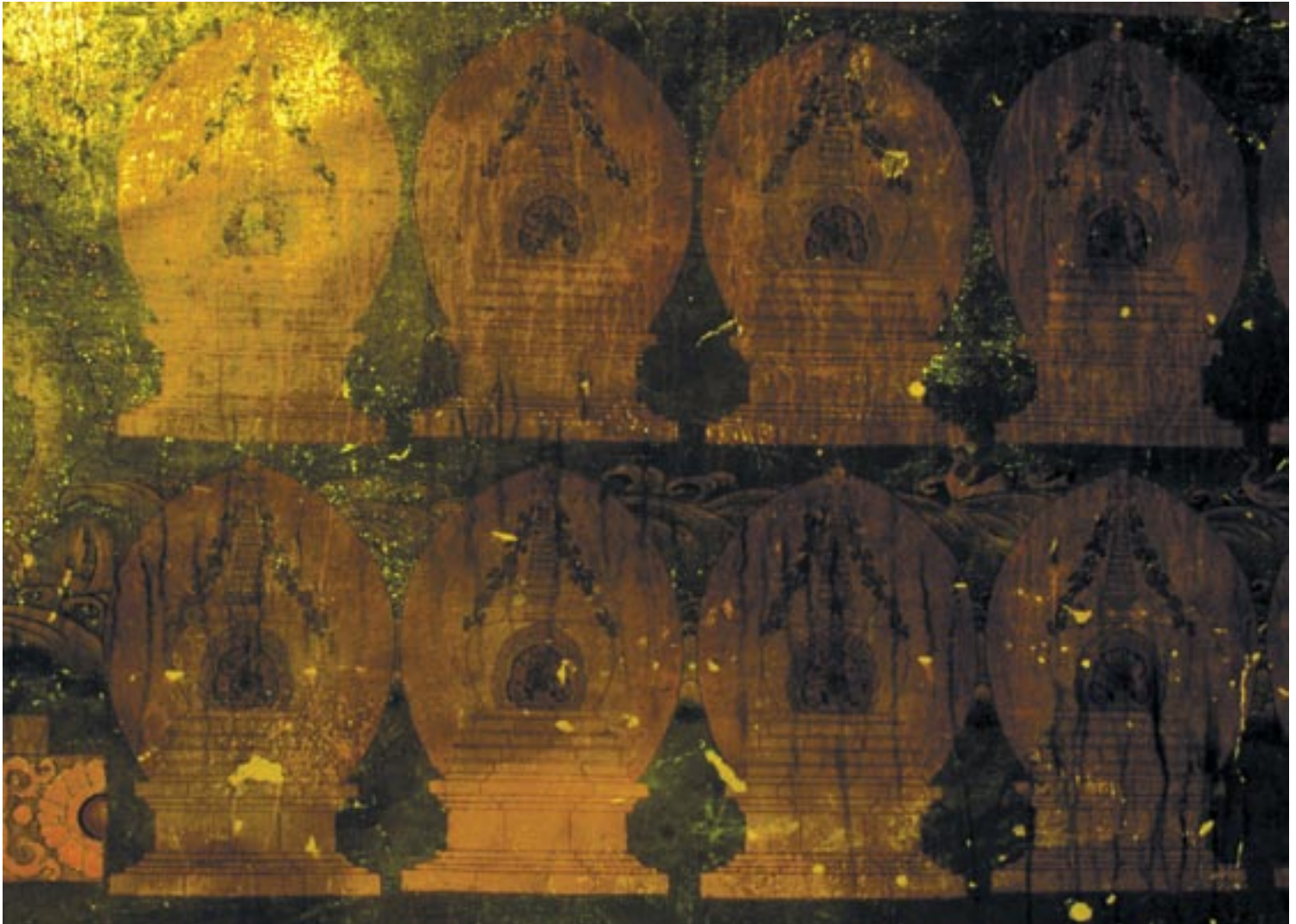
On the roof, the raised ceiling section of the *sanctum* still preserves eternal-knot shaped grilles in front of the roof-light windows. Stone steps are the only remaining trace of the U-tse Tsa-sum (*dBu rtse rtsa gsum*) chapel that once stood above the *sanctum*. It was adorned with a gilded Chinese-style canopy roof (*rgya phibs*) and a *ganjira* spire, and it can be seen prominently on old photographs of Lhasa.⁴ Also gone are the eight little chapels and turrets (*lcog*) that stood on the roof surrounding the central chapel. Presently the only room on the roof is a tin-roofed office building of the gov-

ernment Grain Department with blue glass windows, accessed via a modern external stairway attached to the southern facade.

Further comparison with the old photographs and various depictions on mural and *tangka* paintings reveals that four roof turrets on each corner had roof canopies, and four smaller turrets facing the four directions had *ganjira* spires. The central chapel's roof was also adorned by a gilded spire and flanked by four metal *gyentsen* banners.

The central roof chapel and the eight roof chapels also each had *penbey* friezes with gilded *melong* ornaments.

A two-story, 12-pillar service building for the caretakers known as Jebum Dra-sha (*rje 'bum grva shag*) still stands to the north of the site and is now used as public housing. The three-story residence of the Namgyel Dra-tsang-appointed abbots, known as Jebum-gang Khenpo-tsang (*mkhan po tshang*), further to the north, was demolished in 1997.



Mural detail, stupa images with a Vajrapani figure in the dome. According to the Thirteenth Dalai Lama, 1200 such images were painted on the interior walls (1996 AA).

Site Evaluation

The Jebum Lha-khang was one of the most inspiring examples of (recent) historic Tibetan architecture, because of its perfect symmetry and immaculate construction.

Even in its state of neglect and without the upper floor structures, it is one of Lhasa's most important architectural monuments, highly deserving protection. Otherwise, the view of architectural preservation expressed by the Foodgrains Office in its 2000 alteration (see below) will prevail.

The stone walls are still strong, but the ceiling structure has been weakened by water infiltration, which the added weight of the new upper floor is likely to aggravate. As is often the case in Tibet, after forcible removal of upper-floor chapels and rooms, the damaged roof surface can no longer adequately protect from rain. This places the surviving late 19th century wall paintings and architectural details in jeopardy.



Detail of the portico timber frame; an exceptionally well-carved dzibar image adorns the pillar capital (1995 AA).



Right: Five carved lions are placed above the door lintel of the sanctum (looking outward); some of them are damaged (1996 AA).

Far Right: Sanctum, presently used for storing sacks of grain. The clay images which included Maitreya (Jampa) are missing. Only fragments remain of the wall-paintings (1996 AA).



Postscript

A telephone call from the Lhasa City Cultural Relics office to THF's Lhasa office in mid-2000 informed us that the Foodgrains Office had requested to remove parts of the old *penbey* frieze to construct a new extension on the second floor, and that permission would be granted. The additional building (see opposite photo, top) poses a danger to the structural stability, as the ceiling was already weakened in 1996. It also changes the profile significantly. THF bought the removed *penbey* material, planning at the time to use it for the restoration of the Shöl printing house.



In 2000, the Lhasa Grain Department enlarged their office building above the south portico, removing most of the penbey frieze in the process (2000 AA).

Notes

- ¹ A smaller *chörten* stood next to the temple until 1967.
- ² See appended translation of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama's account of the founding, and *Grong khyer lha sa'i lo rgyus rig gnas* Vol.VI (1998) pp.70-71. Gehlek Rinpoché, personal communication, New York 2003 added information missing from the official accounts. Waddell (1905/1988 p.402) was told that it was founded in 1891, i.e. 13 years before he arrived in Lhasa with the invading British troops.
- ³ See chapter 11.1 for details.
- ⁴ This important photograph reproduced here was kindly provided by the late Hugh Richardson in 1998, and together we tried to distinguish the gilded rooftops of Ramoché, Tsemön-ling and Jebum-gang.



All that remains of the roof chapel are the foundations and stone steps leading to where the entrance once was. Two carved screens provide light for the sanctum below (1996 AA).



In 1993, the area in front of the western gate of the Jebum-gang Lha-khang was a garbage dump (1993 JM).