

Standing at a Crossroads: The Struggle to Preserve Leh Old Town

Leh, the capital of the Ladakh region in India's Jammu & Kashmir state, is a small town dominated by an iconic historic monument, the hilltop palace of its former kings. The old quarter at the foot of the hill—a high Himalayan townscape of equal historic value, once occupied by ministers, merchants and artisans—now looks set to disappear as new development encroaches.

The first royal temples and stupas were constructed in Leh in the early 15th century, and in the mid-16th century, the founder of the Namgyal dynasty, Tashi

Namgyal, commissioned a fortified palace on the peak overlooking the valley. Three generations later, in the 1630s, King Sengge Namgyal, ruler of what had by then become the most powerful principality in the west Himalayas, commissioned the Lachen Pelkhar palace, a grandiose structure intended to rival those of neighbouring rulers in Tibet proper. He invited leading families to settle within the fortified area below the palace, and remnants of the old city walls still stand.

This pattern—a hilltop palace with a walled town on the lower slopes—is typical of Tibetan settlements, reflecting social hierarchy and the need to preserve arable land. With the fall of the Ladakh monarchy two centuries later, the main bazaar grew up outside the city walls as, in the British colonial era, Leh changed from a royal capital into a regional outpost.

Leh Old Town, consisting of some 200 stone, mud and timber houses, is still accessed via several ancient stupa gateways. After the sweeping changes in Tibet proper under Chinese rule, Leh possesses perhaps the most significant assemblage of historic Tibetan-style urban architecture to survive into the 21st century.

Over the same period, Ladakh's economy and society have likewise changed dramatically. The town of Leh has sprawled far beyond its traditional limits, and many of the



View of the palace overlooking traditional buildings in Leh Old Town

former fields have been built over. Yet it was only officially declared a city in 2005, and is still visibly expanding. Much of this growth has been fuelled by commercial construction to support a fast-growing tourism industry and the emergence of an affluent urban sector. But many of those who have stayed in the old town do not own land, and work in the nearby fields or as labourers. Most of these residents lack the sort of income that would enable them to repair houses that have been deteriorating for decades. Many rent their houses from owners who have moved out to new areas, and who have little interest in

investing in the old town.

At the same time, the concrete frame construction and the motorable roads favoured by developers have encroached, rapidly changing the character and integrity of the old town. There is an urgent need for strong regulation and for a systematic programme to repair the ramshackle houses, to arrest the decline, secure the homes of the local community, and preserve unique architectural heritage. In 1982, the Leh Palace was declared a Monument of National Importance under India's 1958 Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act, but the declaration did not extend to the old town.

In 2003–05, André Alexander and the Tibet Heritage Fund (THF) team carried out a survey of social conditions and historic structures in Leh. They found that more than 60 per cent of all buildings in the old town were inhabited by the owners, either exclusively (37 per cent) or with some rooms rented out (26 per cent). Thirty per cent of buildings were occupied by tenants and 10 per cent were vacant, often in a very dilapidated condition. Only a quarter of buildings in the old town were in good or very good condition, while more than half were in poor condition. Many very run-down houses were still inhabited. There were only five public water taps in the central area and drainage was poor, with a handful of open channels that were frequently blocked (or frozen).

Based on the survey's findings, THF proposed an integrated conservation approach, along the lines of the Old City Conservation Program pioneered by the organization in

Lhasa (1996–2000). The Leh Old Town Conservation Project was set up in cooperation with the local government, the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council (LAHDC), and local community groups. A local organization was also established and registered as the Leh Old Town Initiative (LOTI). Since the early 2000s, approximately thirty buildings have been repaired and reoccupied.

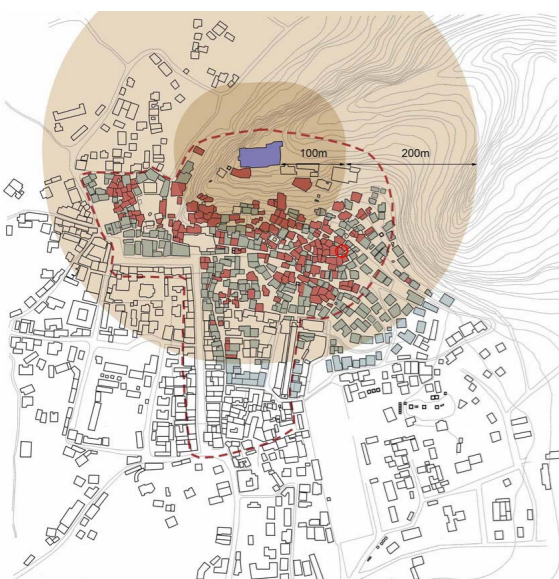
In 2006, Alexander formulated a proposed management plan for the restoration and conservation of Leh old town, and LAHDC stated its commitment to turn old Leh into a heritage zone, as defined in the 'Ladakh 2005–2025 Vision Statement'. Since 2008, Leh Old Town has been included in the World Monuments Watch List of 100 Most Endangered Sites published by the World Monuments Fund. In 2010, the Ladakh Chapter of the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH) was created to preserve the cultural heritage of the region, and by 2011 the Jammu and Kashmir Heritage Conservation and Preservation Act had also come into force. Despite this awareness of the heritage value of old Leh and its importance to the tourism industry, no regulations or guidelines have been introduced to safeguard its protection; instead, it is now officially considered a slum.

In 2012, the Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation approved the Rajiv Awas Yojana (RAY) slum development project that included Leh Old Town in its vision of a 'Slum-free India'. Besides the much-needed infrastructure for the city of Leh, this scheme planned to replace 73 historic

buildings in Leh Old Town with individual concrete buildings measuring 25 square metres. Under urban planning criteria in India, concrete structures are categorized as permanent, and stone, adobe and wood structures as non-permanent, awaiting replacement. If this project were implemented, some 40 per cent of Leh Old Town would be replaced by standardized concrete boxes designed in mainland India, where the climate and other conditions differ radically from those in Ladakh. In its conservation programme for the Leh Palace, the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) has relied on a Central Government act that forbids new construction within 100 metres of a protected monument and restricts construction within 200 metres. However, this ruling has



The historic Banday House (left), home of 19th century Ladakhi explorer Baba Kalam Rassul, its wood balcony now blocked in by the concrete balcony of a new tourist facility



Map of Leh Old Town, 2007, showing the historic town (marked by the dotted line), historic buildings in red, and the palace in blue (Map: THF and LOTI)



Every year, more new concrete structures are replacing the historic buildings in the Old Town, significantly impacting on a local economy that relies on tourism



Lala's Café, a heritage house restored by THF in 2005, with the 11th century statue of Maitreya in front. The neighbouring house to the left has been marked with a RAY scheme code

not been used to curb private construction in the past or to moderate the implementation of the RAY scheme today, although the Leh Palace and the old town have potential to be listed in the UNESCO World Heritage List, and it is crucial to preserve the integrity and authenticity of sites to be nominated. Investment under the scheme will bring overall benefit in terms of infrastructure, but the replacement of historic buildings with concrete frame structures would result in a huge loss of cultural heritage and quality of life.

In 2014, THF and Prince Claus Fund held an international symposium, 'The importance of conserving Leh Old Town', to promote dialogue among stakeholders and raise awareness of the need for conservation and regulation. At the symposium, the Chief Executive Councillor (CEC) of LAHDC stated that the body would

'restore Leh Old Town to its former glory'. THF, INTACH-Leh, and other individuals and organizations have raised concerns with the authorities in Leh and Delhi, regarding the RAY scheme and its potential impact on the old town, yet the scheme is going ahead. To conserve what remains of the old town, the heritage zone and buffer zone must be defined as a matter of urgency, and guidelines drawn up regarding the repair of old houses and construction of new buildings. Monitoring must ensure that these regulations are enforced and no further damage done.

We are standing at a crossroads at which we are faced with either the preservation or the disappearance of Leh Old Town. Only with the concerted effort of those concerned about Ladakh's heritage will this site of extraordinary cultural and historical importance be preserved.

André Alexander, Pimpim de Azevedo and Yutaka Hirako.

The late André Alexander, co-director of THF, was affiliated with Berlin University of Technology (MSc in Urban Management and PhD in Architecture). Pimpim de Azevedo is a Tibetan architect conservator, with a MRes in Heritage Sciences (UCL), who founded Tibet Heritage Fund with Alexander in 1996. Both were trained in traditional Tibetan architecture by master craftsmen in Lhasa and developed a community-based conservation approach to old towns and settlements. Alexander worked on the conservation of Ladakh heritage from 2003 to 2011. Yutaka Hirako is an architect working with THF in China since 1998, and since 2012, in Ladakh.

Images are courtesy of Tibet Heritage Fund.