

# Different Approaches to Conservation in Tibet

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Monument approach

vs.

Living historic neighbourhood

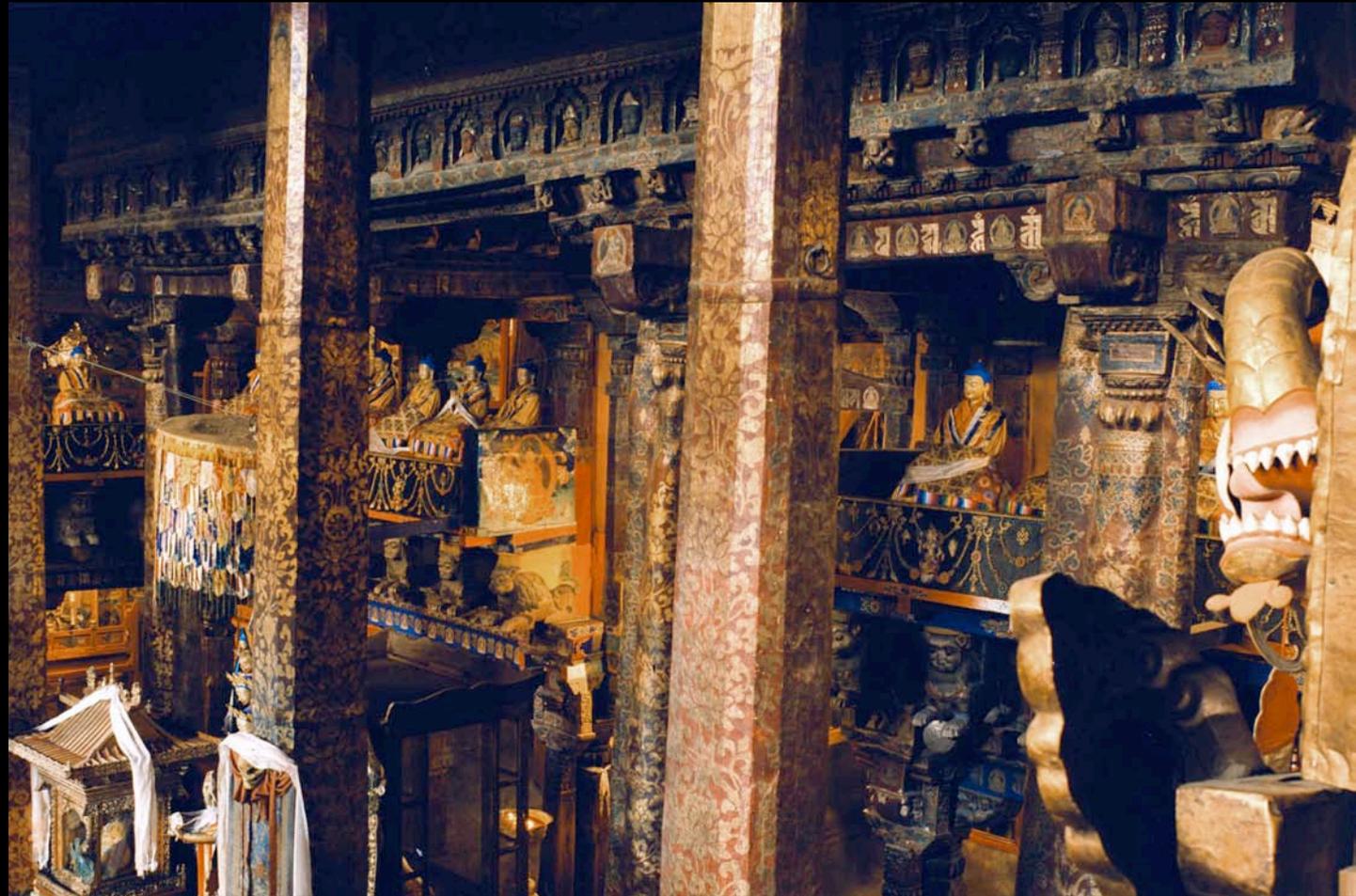
by André Alexander



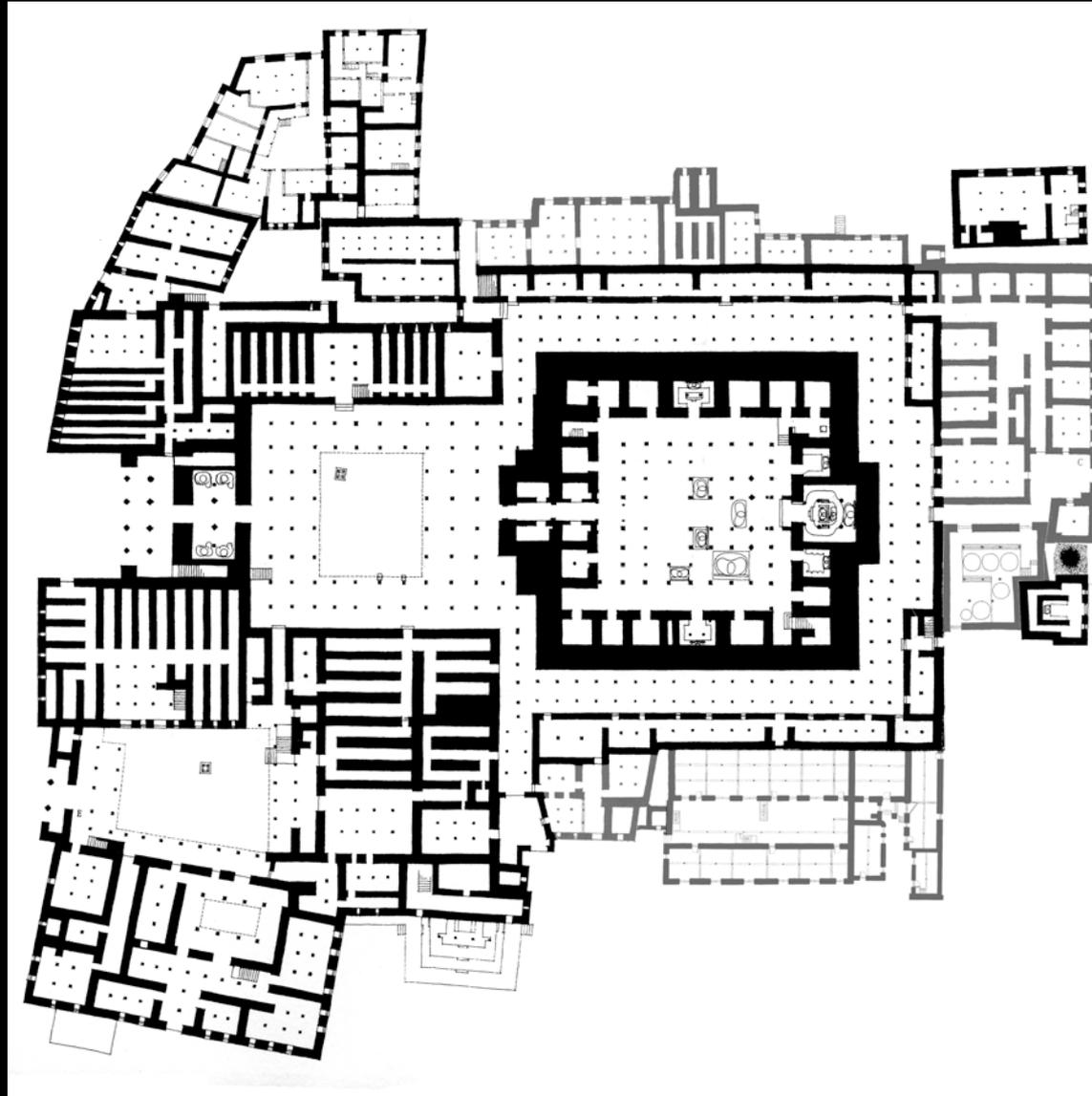
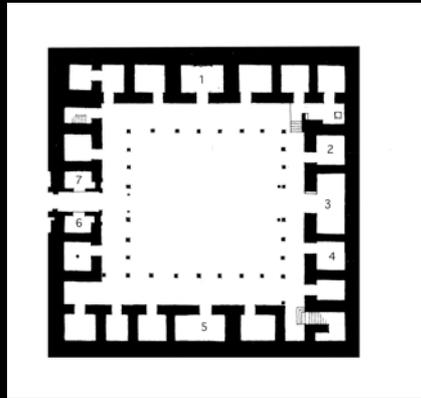
Founding of Lhasa Jokhang in ca. 639

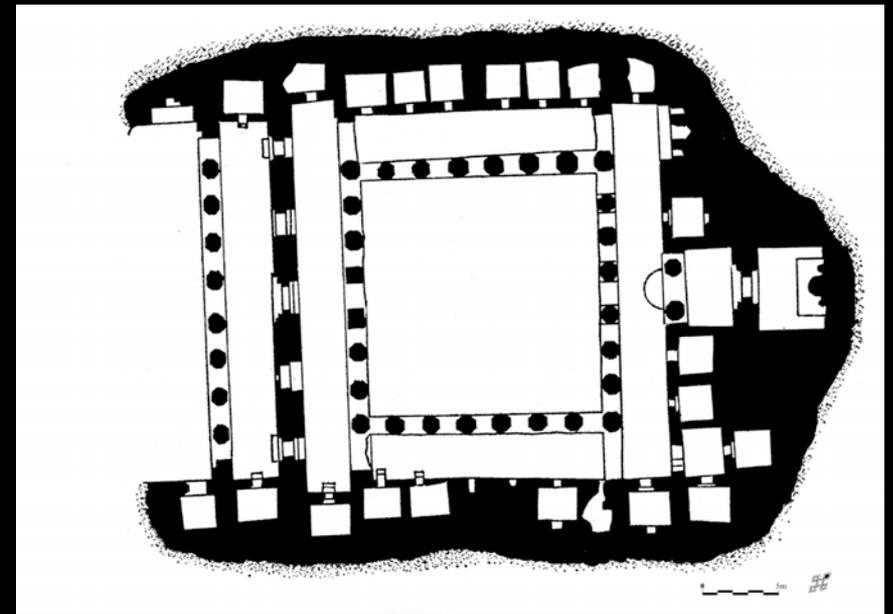
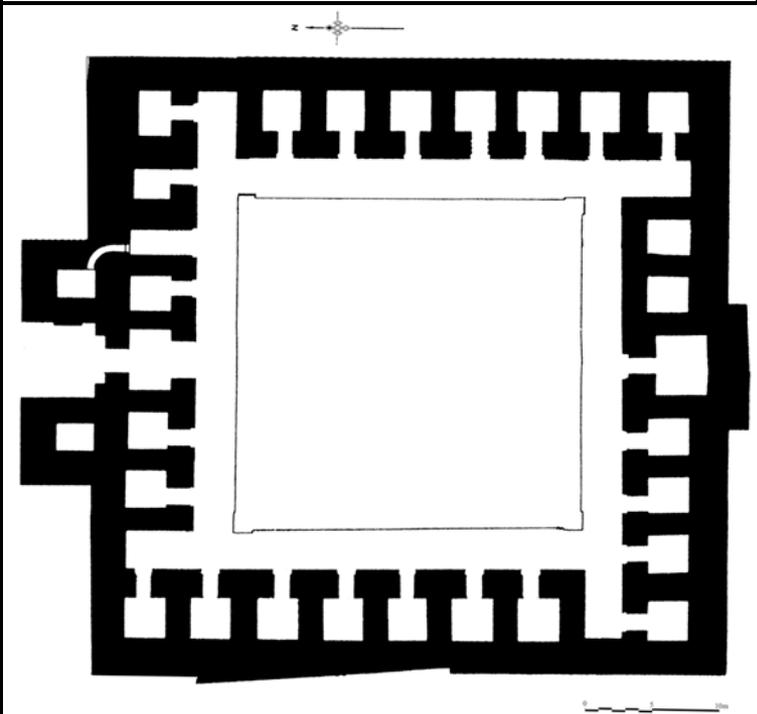
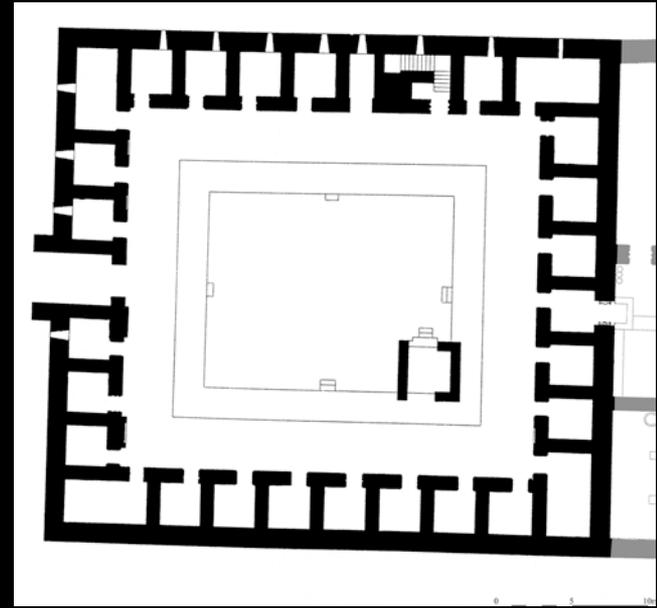
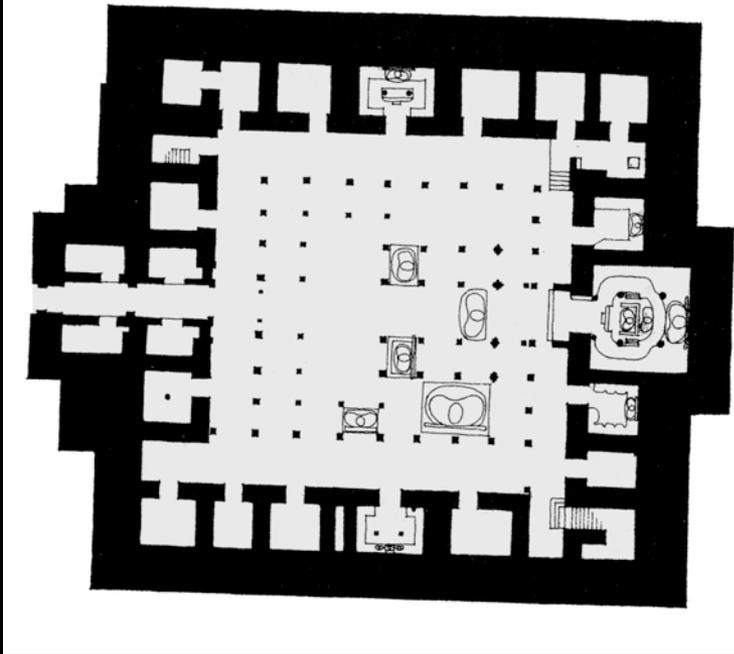
In early 9<sup>th</sup> century King Ralpacen carries out important restoration, adding 4 "sky-bearing" pillars and mentions the temple in his inscription at the Karchung Doring

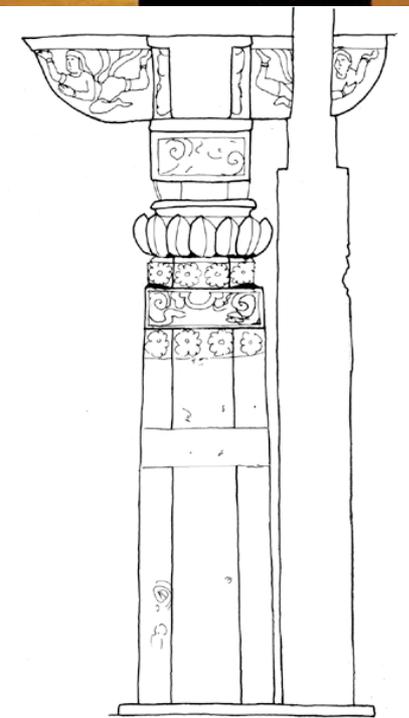
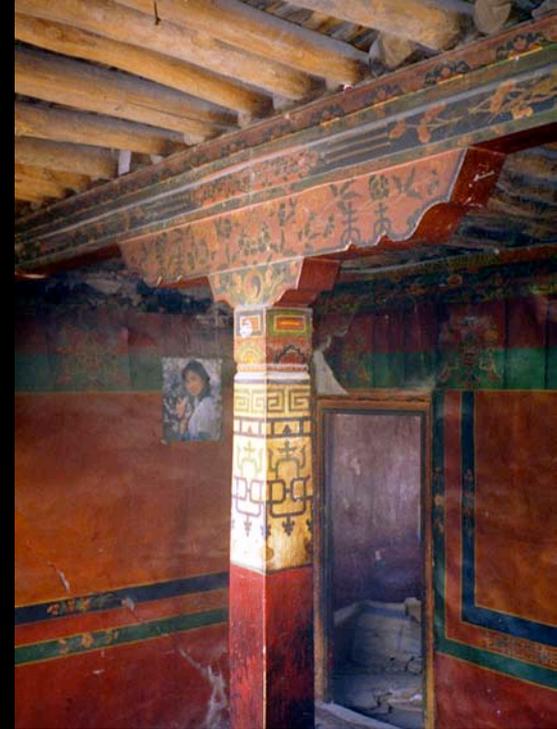
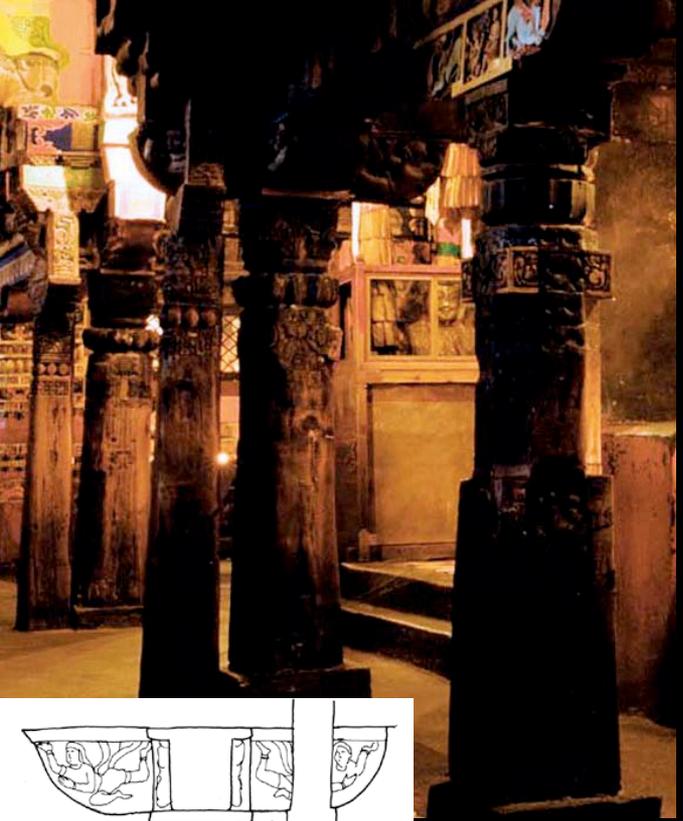
Since then restoration of the Lhasa Jokhang became an important *leitmotif* in Tibetan history. Subsequent rulers and spiritual masters all carried out renovation and embellishment works.



After 1300 years of renovation and extension works, if we look at the structure today, we find that the Lhasa Jokhang has preserved its authentic 7<sup>th</sup> century floor plan.



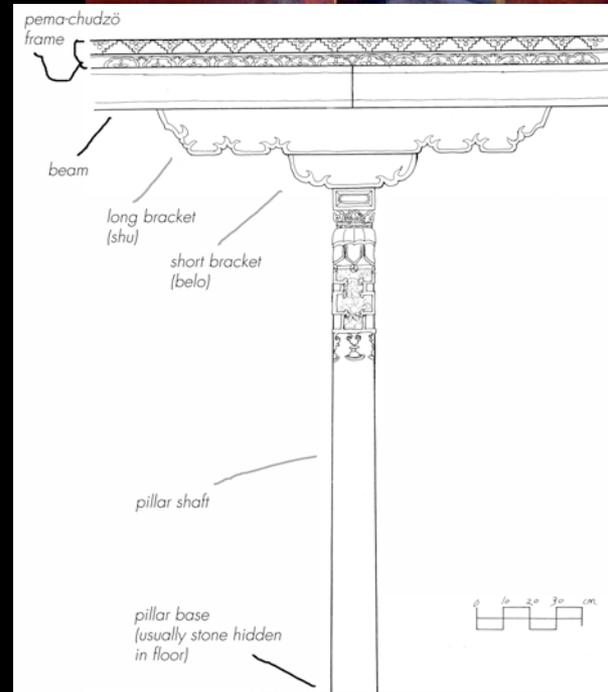




The degree of conservation also includes wooden elements that preserve early Indian forms. C14 dating suggests that at least some of them could be original.

Lhasa Jokhang pillars and Indian prototype

Standard Tibetan pillar form



Nine historic doorways in Indian design have been preserved, indicating the original 7th century chapel rooms

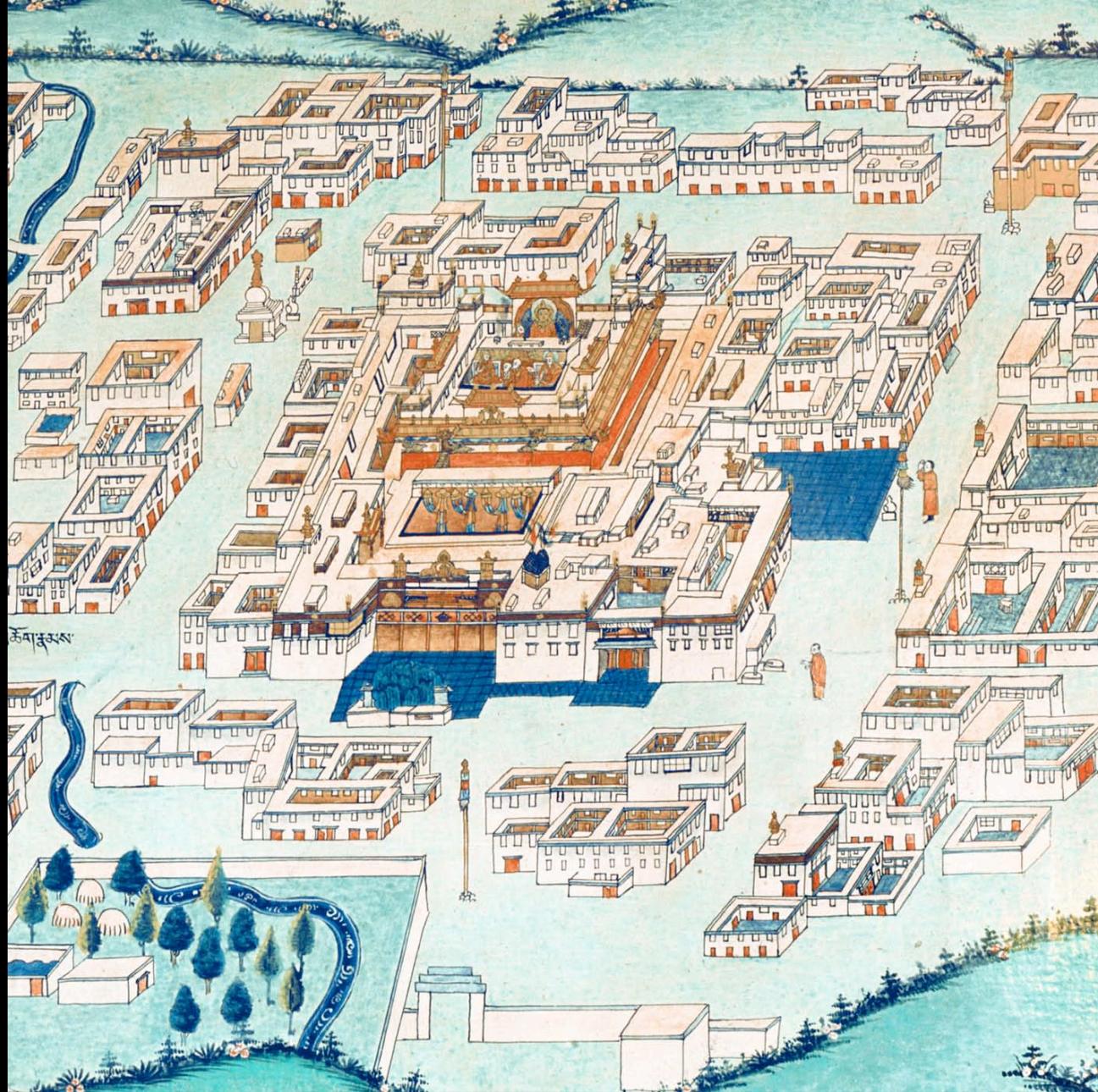


Until the early 1990s, even very early murals (perhaps dynastic or early post-dynastic) have been preserved.



All this is because the prestige and spiritual value of the association with Songtsan Gampo have kept donors, rulers and lama-s from undoing any of the original architectural and artistic work. Instead, they concentrated on constantly enlarging the temple instead.

We can observe that in the traditional society of Tibet, there existed been a clear tradition of conservation. Some of the measures taken within this tradition are compatible with current international practice.



2.) From 1959 to the late 1970s, a terrible wave of destruction swept across Tibet, leading to the complete destruction of the majority of monuments.



### 3.) Period of re-organization

Since the early 1980s, a new approach of conservation has been in practice in Tibet. It has been developed in Beijing for the whole of China, without concessions to local conditions.

We shall call it "the monument approach".

It bears the following characteristics:

- focus on a non-religious and non-local usage (tourism), restriction of traditional usage
- removal of adjacent historic vernacular structures (separating the monument from its context)
- "beautification" of monument by building new and entirely alien surroundings
- resettlement of residential communities elsewhere



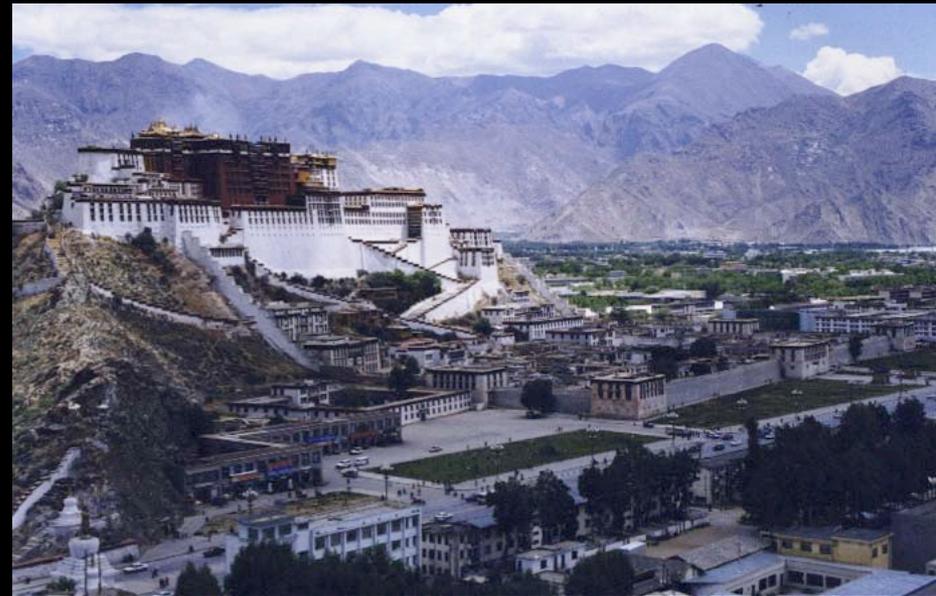
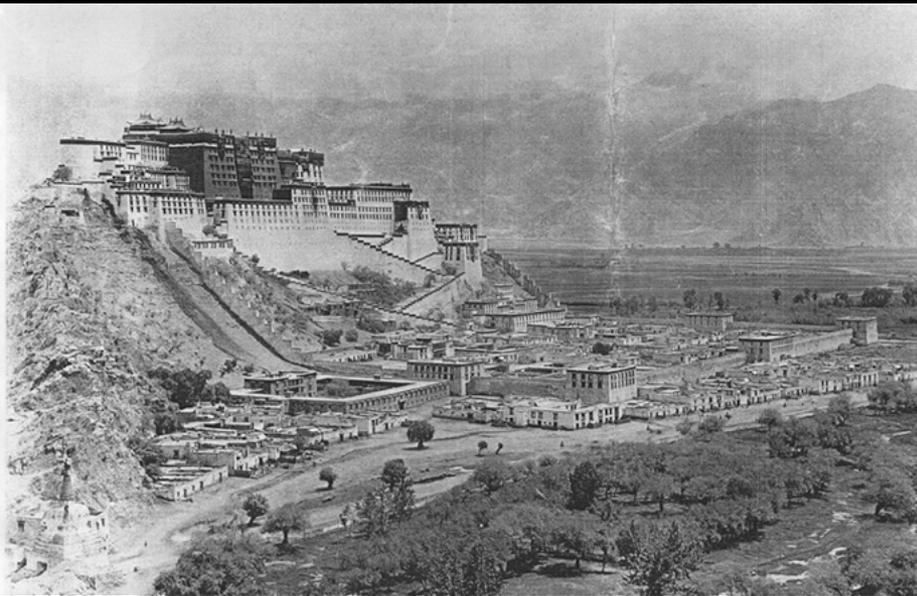
# Examples of the "monument approach" 1985

The creation of the Jokhang Barkor square 1984-85, demolition of historic western part of Barkor and creation of a new open square with fountains and shrubberies.



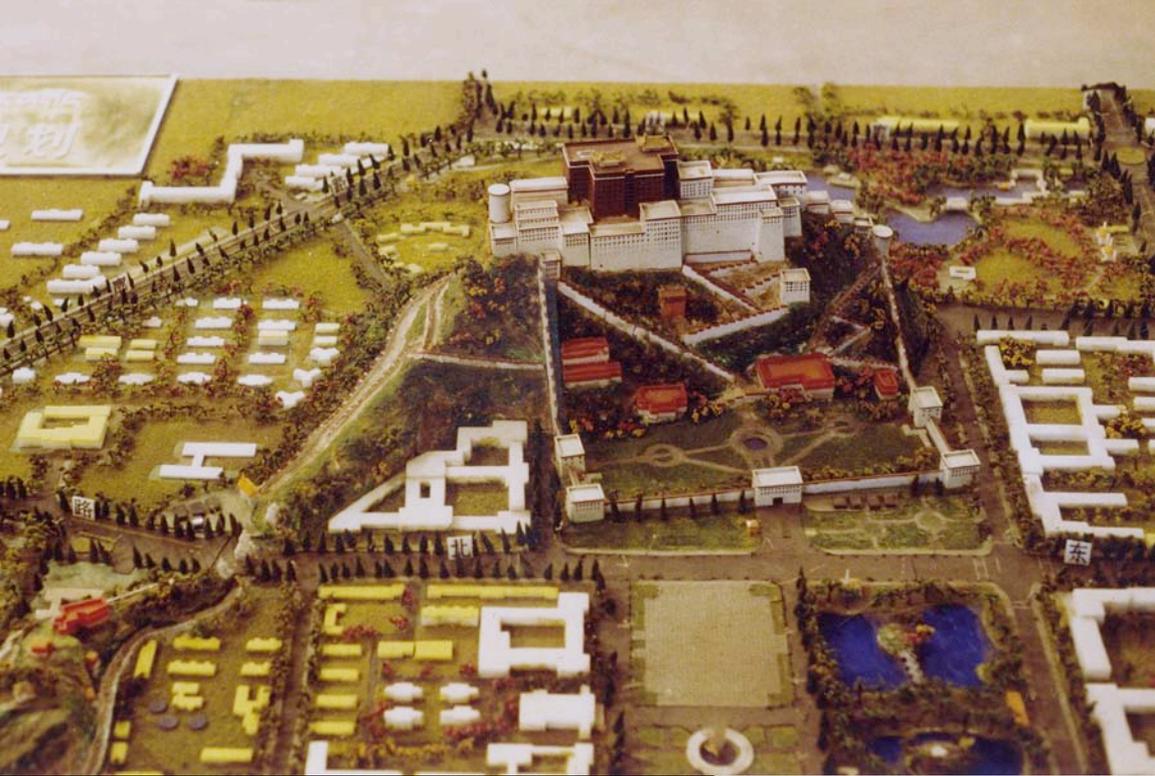
# 1995

In December 1994, the Potala Palace in Lhasa was listed on the UNESCO World Heritage List. In summer 1995, over 140 Tibetan families residing in Shoel were evicted from their homes and resettled to the north of Lhasa.



Over 40 historic buildings in outer and inner Shoel were demolished. Even though they formed part of the historic ensemble "Potala and Shoel", and many dated to the 17th century, they were not deemed important at the time, not "part of the monument".





Where many people have had their homes all their life, in a living historic environment, a lot of empty space has been created. Under the monument approach ordinary residents and even vernacular architecture are considered incompatible with historic conservation.





With the progress in transformation of China's economy, the monument conservation approach was modified in the late 1990s. Monuments can now be surrounded by modern private housing (as opposed to public), or by modern commercial retail space. In December 2001 the Lhasa Jokhang was listed on the World Heritage List as an extension of the Potala Palace listing. In summer 2002, the Ngakhang wing of the Jokhang was demolished, and private apartment blocks were built on the site.

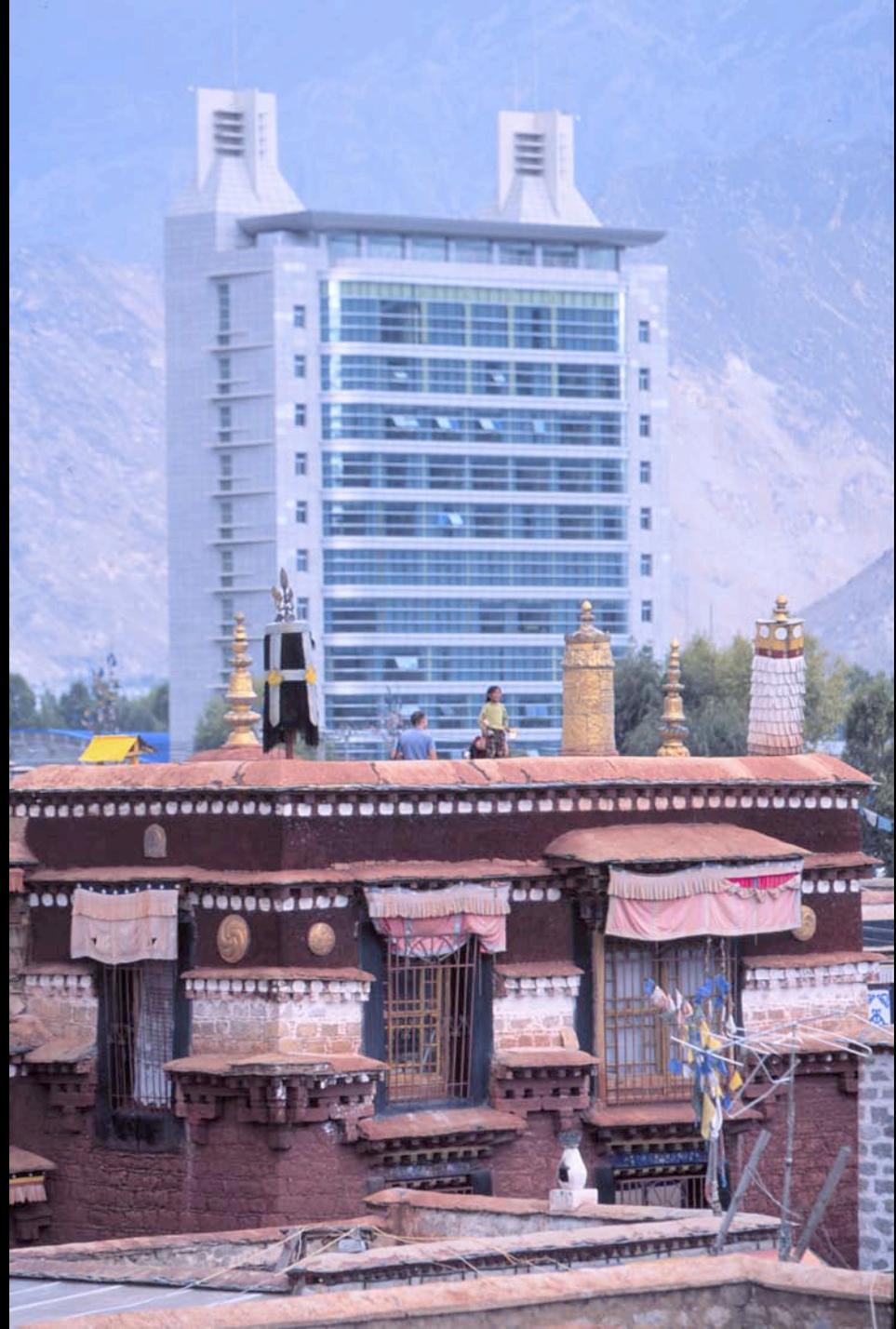


In spring 2006, more shops were built in front of the Lhasa Jokhang.



## 4.) Effects of the monument approach after 20 years:

- some key monuments are well-preserved (Lhasa Jokhang, Potala Palace etc.)



- historic urban structures have mostly disappeared from across the Tibetan plateau





The old city centres of Lhasa, Chamdo and other towns have been decimated.





A clash of different visions for the future of Tibet's urban settlements exists



## There is some hope...

The Lhasa Tourism Department and the Construction Department planned to resettle all residents from the Barkor area in 2000. Gateways were to be erected, and entrance charged from visitors. Preparations began in 2003-2004. However, the central government intervened recently, stopped the plan and severely criticised all involved officials. There is some hope. Wen Jiao-bao particularly has spoken out in favour of preserving China's historic cities

*"At present, the pre-eminent problem existing in our country's urban construction is that some city leaders only see the economic values of natural and cultural relics but know little about the historical, scientific, cultural and artistic value of them. They seek only economic benefits and development while neglecting protection, so damage to natural and cultural relics are occurring frequently. Some city leaders simply deem the constructions of high-rise buildings as urban modernization while paying insufficient attention to protection of natural scenes and historical and cultural relics. Their large-scale dismantling and building during old city reconstruction have damaged many traditional districts and buildings with historical and culture values. Some other city leaders prefer to demolish true historical relics and build false historical sites and artificial scenes. Though they have spent a large amount of money the results are neither fish nor fowl. We must resolutely correct such wrong practices."*

Quoted from a speech given by China State Council member Vice Premier Wen Jiabao at the 3rd representative conference of China Mayors' Association.

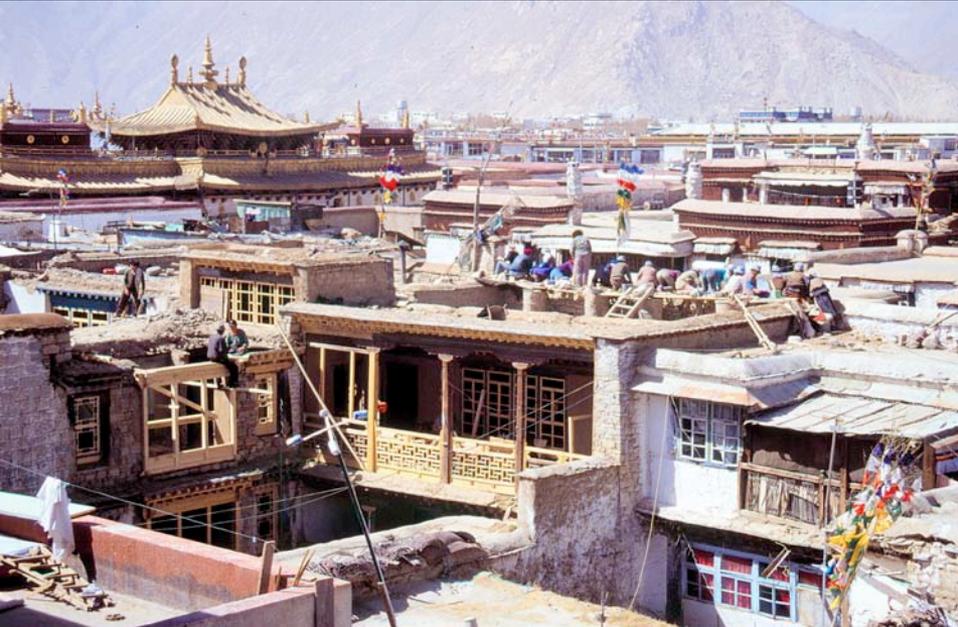
## 5. Relevant International experience

The GTZ Bhaktapur project in Nepal has provided an important lesson in the history of international aid cooperation.

In the mid-1970s, German technical assistance started to work on restoration of buildings in the historic town of Bhaktapur in Nepal, but without involving residents in planning and implementation of the project. In the late 1970s, the Bhaktapur residents organized boycotts and strikes and forced the GTZ to negotiate further contents of the project.

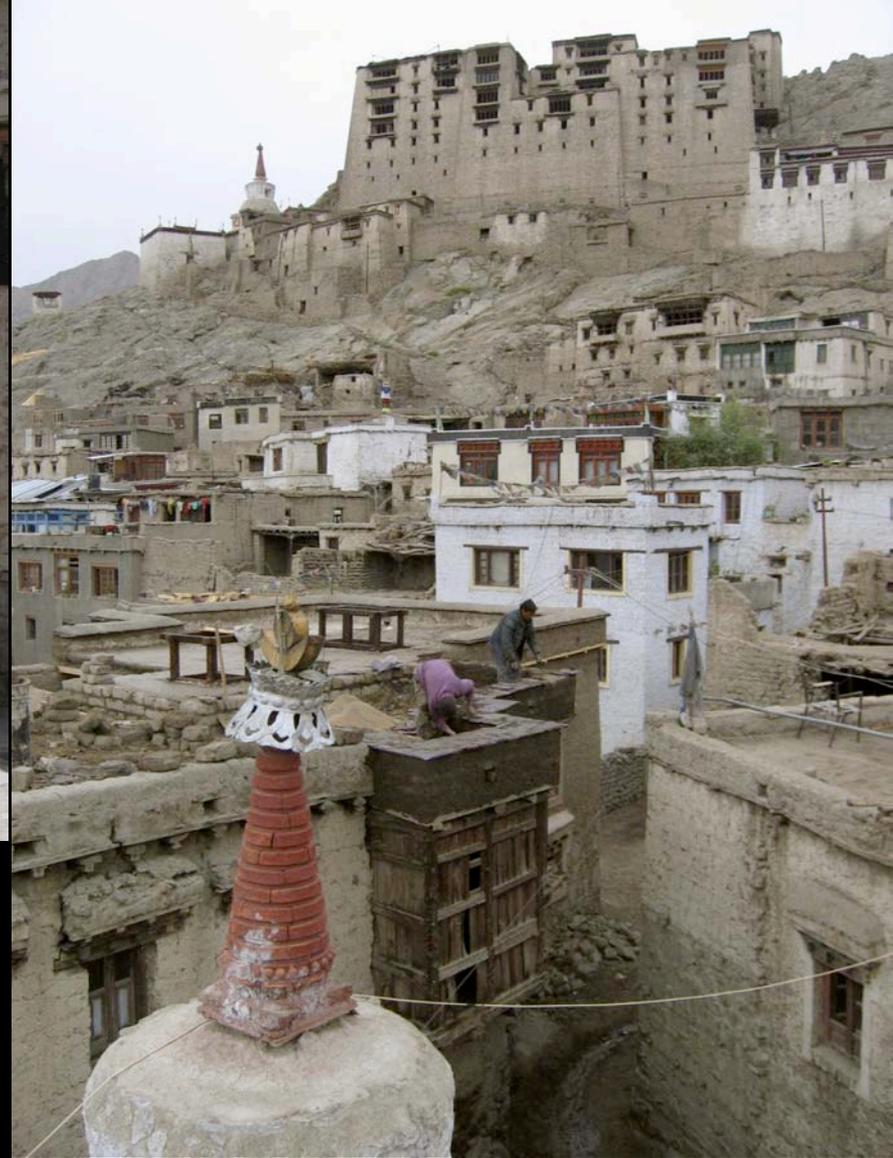
Since then it has become common wisdom for such projects that it is impossible to preserve or rehabilitate historic areas without participation of the concerned residents.





Nevertheless, nowhere in Tibet has there been a follow-up to the Lhasa Old Town Project, a community-based urban preservation project (though there are such initiatives in Chinese cities such as Beijing)..





In a very different social environment, fully community-based urban rehabilitation of Leh, the historic capital of India's Ladakh region, is currently taking place.

The basic challenges - infrastructure and dealing with mud architecture - are the same as all over Tibet. Exchanges between Leh and Lhasa (and other historic Tibetan towns) could be very beneficial.

Conservation work can include working with monastic communities from planning through to implementation stages, as well as training monks in conservation approaches and maintenance.

Examples below: Amdo 2005, right: Ladakh 2006.



Conservation can also take new ways, such as finding creative adaptive usage for historic buildings.

Example: heritage house in Leh



## Problems remain:

In Tibet, many officials have been in power for a very long time, some since the end of the Cultural Revolution.

Affected communities have no way of participating in projects, even if such projects are funded by international agencies (examples Chamdo, recent UN project in Lhasa).

Currently, land-grabbing and forced resettlement affect many Tibetan communities, as well as local resident communities all across China. With dubious reasoning, beautiful pieces of land are confiscated, and residents moved to new settlements constructed entirely new, lacking all the qualities (material and aesthetic) of historic Tibetan settlements.

Unless these problems are solved, the precious remaining historic Tibetan vernacular structures are in danger of disappearing altogether.

## Join In

In regards to conservation work and conservation studies of Tibetan monuments, international cooperation and net-working is encouraged.

We invite you to share contacts, reports and discussions with us, and we hope to meet some of you again at a special forum devoted to conservation issues sometime next year.



**Thank You!**