



**Special preview opening of the Central Asian Museum
& workshop on Archaeological research and architectural conservation in Ladakh:
a report**

Learning in Spring 2011 that the venue of the 15th IALS conference (19th-21st of August) was shifted from Aberdeen to Leh, Andre Alexander and Laurianne Bruneau, assisted by Quentin Devers and Martin Vernier, proposed to the committee of the Central Asian Museum to organize a workshop and celebrate the opening of this new place of local culture.

With the support of the committee and more particularly Mr. Abdul Ghani Sheik and Dr. Muhammad Deen as well as the financial support of Mr. Saleem Beg through the Jammu & Kashmir chapter of INTACH (Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage) the workshop was held right in the continuity of the IALS conference on Tuesday 23rd of August so that local, national and international present in Leh could attend.

Special preview opening of the Central Asian Museum (9 – 11 am)

The Central Asian Museum, initially sponsored by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, Jammu & Kashmir State, aims at commemorating the multifaceted history of Ladakh and educating the public about it.

For centuries, Ladakh has been an important crossroads of Central Asian caravan trade. Like few other regions, Ladakh's culture has been shaped by the transmission of goods and ideas from such disparate regions as Tibet, Yarkand, Kashmir, Afghanistan and city states like Samarkand and Bukhara, connected by the various branches of the Silk Roads. The Indian partition and the occupation of Tibet put an end to cross-border trade for the time being, plunging Ladakh into relative geographic and cultural isolation.

The Museum is built in the Tsas Soma Gardens, on land where the caravans used to camp. Ladakhi king Senge Namgyal gave permission to some traders to build Leh's first mosque on these grounds. After the restoration of the mosque by Tibet Heritage Fund (THF) in cooperation with the Anjuman Moin-ul Islam society in 2007, the idea for a museum was launched by the former Director of J & K Tourism, Saleem Beg, and the eminent Ladakhi historian Abdul Ghani Sheikh. The museum was then designed by André Alexander and the THF Ladakh team, with participation of the School of Architecture, Berlin University of Technology, and input from artisans from Ladakh, other parts of India and Nepal, and volunteers from Germany, Switzerland and France.

A committee to run the museum was formed, registered as the Society for the Preservation of Trans-Himalayan Art and Culture. Presided by A. Ghani Sheikh, members include Nazir Khan, Dr. M. Deen, Captain A. Qadir, Mohammed Ayub and THF's André Alexander, and additional advisors Saleem Beg, Monisha Ahmed and Janet Rizvi. Alexander, Sheikh & the THF team are also designing the permanent exhibition.

The museum is designed in the shape of a Tibetan-Ladakhi fortified tower, with a contemporary edge. The square ground plan is based on ancient Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim places of worship, with a circumambulation corridor that becomes a passage to the upper floors. Each of the four floor levels has a different architectural interior, reflecting the thematic organization of the building. Mainly traditional Ladakhi construction materials of stone, timber and mud have been used. Each piece of granite stone was individually hand-shaped by masons on site. Ladakhi carpenters have carved timber elements that reflect local, Kashmiri and Tibetan designs. The exit opens to the Tsas Soma gardens, an idyllic oasis in the center of Leh, with ancient willow trees and a water channel.

After the official ribbon-cutting ceremony and an inaugural speech by Andre Alexander, all guests were invited to tour the museum and discover its collection, still in the process of setting up.



The ground floor is dedicated to Ladakh, and serves as introduction. A large map of Central Asia, showing the different trade routes converging on Leh, helps to define the purpose of the museum. This floor also informs about the history of Ladakh, from the earliest signs of human civilization manifested in rock art through the reigns of the Ladakhi kings up to the present. On display are artifacts connected with the daily life of caravan traders, and traditional Ladakhi household items. The first floor is dedicated to Central Asia. There are items of Central Asian Muslim states and regions, such as dresses, carpets, saddles and other trade items. The regions featured will include Baltistan, Kashmir, Altashar (today Chinese Xinjiang) and Uzbekistan.

The third level is the Tibet floor. Here there will be artefacts from the Lhasa-Leh trade, the bi-annual Ladakhi Lapcha mission to Lhasa, and information about the Buddhist culture, art and architecture of Ladakh. Noticeable is a 3D reproduction of the Saspola cave along wooden Buddhist pieces from Zanskar and the Nubra valley.

The fourth floor is the highlight of the museum. Its open gallery offers a 360 degrees view over Leh and overlooking the palace. The room in Baltistani architectural style receives changing exhibitions and multi-media installations. For the preview opening of the museum black and white photographs of local figures connected to the old Central Asian trade and involved in a way or another in the museum were displayed.



The preview opening of the museum was very successful, counting about a hundred guests and we believe everyone appreciated the efforts put into the creation of this place dedicated to regional culture. The public opening of the museum is scheduled for July 2012, until then the collection and display will be enriched.

After a cup of tea, around 11 am, all guests were invited to reach the Trans-Himalayan Library where the workshop was held. This library is located within Tsas Soma Gardens next to the museum and opened since June 2011.

Workshop on Archaeological research and architectural conservation in Ladakh (11 am – 5 pm)

The core idea of the workshop was to gather main actors doing research or acting in the field of cultural heritage in Ladakh and provide them a chance to meet and share ideas.

The workshop was attended by about 50 persons, local representatives but also local, national and international scholars.

After a short presentation speech of the workshop by Laurianne Bruneau, André Alexander heartily thanked all THF volunteers who worked very hard to make the preview opening of the museum possible.



The workshop started with three papers dealing with archaeological research in Ladakh. This morning session was chaired by Mr Saleem Beg (convener of J&K chapter of INTACH) and opened by Mr S.B. Ota, currently regional director of the Central Region (Bhopal) of the Archaeological Survey of India. After presenting the researches he conducted in the 1990s on the Neolithic sites of Gaik and Kiari, Mr Ota showed his latest discoveries (June 2011) in the surroundings of Mulbekh. The presentation gave a very valuable insight into the Prehistory of Ladakh, a period often ignored. The following presentation by Laurianne Bruneau (post-doctoral researcher affiliated to the Centre for Archaeological Research on Indus, Central & Eastern Asia of the CNRS in Paris) was dedicated to rock art. Miss Bruneau presented the results of her Phd, in which she dealt with about 15,000 carvings. She focussed on the thematic and stylistic links between Ladakhi rock art and that of Central Asia during the Bronze and Iron Ages. The last speaker of the morning, Quentin Devers (a Phd candidate in archaeology at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, Paris), showed that the extensive survey of a wide range of remains (burials, fortifications and chortens) allows to fill-in the many gaps of the local history.

After a series of questions the audience was invited to share a lunch served in the library. This was the occasion of informal talks.

The afternoon session dedicated to architectural conservation started around 2.30 and was kindly chaired by John Bray, president of the IALS. The first paper, delivered by Maggie Hui, architect and assistant professor at the Chinese University of Hongkong, dealt with

traditional domestic architecture in Labrang, Amdo (Tibet). She addressed several issues including that of conservation. The examples she showed could be used as dos and don'ts in other Himalayan regions, Ladakh in particular. The second paper, given by André Alexander, co-director of the Tibet Heritage Fund, presented the work accomplished since 2006 by the Leh Old Town Initiative (LOTI) and the challenges ahead, among which the project of traffic road passing through the old town and threatening historical houses.



After a short tea break, the last two papers of the workshop were delivered by Saleem Beg and Tara Sharma. Both are working for INTACH, the former is convener of Jammu & Kashmir chapter and the later that of Ladakh chapter. Mr Beg gave an overview of the numerous and impressive architectural conservation projects conducted by INTACH in J&K over the years. Tara Sharma presented ongoing and future projects of the newly created (June 2011) Ladakh chapter. The formation of artisans skilled in traditional building techniques is for example one of their projects. A future, ambitious project would be to build up a shared database so that all actors involved in cultural heritage in the region benefit from each others' experiences and documentation.

This proposal opened up an hour of animated discussion into which members of the audience actively participated. Various issues concerning the protection of Ladakhi archaeological and architectural heritage were raised and solutions proposed.

The organizers, Laurianne Bruneau and André Alexander, with the support of Saleem Beg expressed their wish to publish the papers of this inaugural workshop. The proceedings could be the first publication of the Central Asian Museum. Finally, they kindly invited donations to the library in the form of printed and scanned books and articles.

Both the museum and the Trans-Himalayan library attached to it are in their infancy, they will be fully operational in the years to come. They are a unique resource in the heart of Leh not only for the public but also scholars working in the field of archaeology, history, art history and cultural conservation.



Report authored by Laurianne Bruneau
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Photographs by Anna Morgan.