

DR ANDRÉ ALEXANDER 17.01.1965 – 21.01.2012

CONSERVATION PIONEER
AND HIMALAYAN HERITAGE HERO

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Few if any architect, historian and conservation heritage experts can boast of having visited and worked at so many sites of Tibetan and Himalayan architecture as André Alexander. For most of his adult life, he was successively or simultaneously active in Tibet, China (in Beijing, and along the Silk Road), Mongolia, Nepal, Sikkim, India (Ladakh) and Bhutan. Preparing again to go to Sikkim, he unexpectedly passed away in his native Berlin on January 21, barely 47 years of age, of sudden heart failure. To countless friends, colleagues and admirers, to many communities and to the many projects he was involved in, the loss felt upon his untimely demise is immense and almost irreplaceable, André was a true pioneer in the preservation and rehabilitation of Tibetan houses in the entire Tibetan cultural world.

Born André Teichmann, he studied history in Berlin, but soon found himself as a wandering backpacker on lengthy travels in Asia. A key experience that would alter his life for good proved to be his visit to the Lhasa Jokhang in 1987. A few years later he witnessed the widespread destruction of wall-paintings there and old buildings torn down in the Barkhor area. Whereas most of the religious architecture generally survived the chaotic and destructive Cultural Revolution in Tibet (1966-78/79), the survival of non-religious, vernacular and residential architecture, the unique mansions of the nobility that make up most of the core of the old Barkhor quarter—the key pilgrimage circuit for countless pilgrims arriving from all over Central Asia—was dramatically endangered due to waves of unbridled modernization and radical urban development following these turbulent years. “Back in the late 1980’s, when I first visited Lhasa,” he wrote, “The old city was still mostly preserved... “On each subsequent visit,” André explained, “houses had vanished—stone by stone, block by block, alley by alley.”

Seeing many houses disappearing in Lhasa’s old town motivated André and a friend Andrew Brennan to launch the Lhasa Archive Project in 1993 with the aim of documenting Lhasa’s endangered vernacular architecture before it was gone for good. Fortunately, they were well equipped for the task, not least due to Peter Aufschneider’s 1948 townhouse map. Soon their mission attracted the active interest of colleagues and well-wishers, foremostly the talented artist Pimpim de Azevedo. In 1996, they officially launched their now widely acclaimed and internationally respected Tibet Heritage Fund (THF). The mission was urgent: Lhasa was about to irrevocably alter its unique cultural and physical identity. From the very start their documentary project was actively supported by institutions and individuals such as Heather Stoddard, Shalu Association, UNESCO, and the Network for Norway-Tibet University Cooperation.

As the work of THF (and its predecessor, the Lhasa Archive Project) became better known, it received funding and awards from UNESCO, the Network for Norway-Tibet University Cooperation, the Shalu Association, offering financial and material support. It was a race against time, of the more than 400 buildings they listed at that time, only 150 or so were still standing by 2001. Aside from surveying historic houses and creating typological records, THF pioneered a number of renovations, stressing the importance of reinvigorating the local architectural heritage and age-old traditions. The individual works were conceived of as community-based restoration and rehabilitation programs for the local residential population, but also incorporating

extensive vocational training programs for new generations of local craftsmen, surveyors, carpenters and artisans.

In 1998, at the height of their work, a number of Tibetan master craftsmen were involved, using traditional construction techniques and indigenous craftsmanship, instigating a last-minute revival of skills on the brink of passing into oblivion. Fearlessly, they negotiated with the local authorities, proved able to ensure permission and to mobilize resources necessary to laydown sewage and plumbing pipes in order to improve the sanitation conditions for local residents. It all took place within the framework of the Lhasa Old Town Conservation Project of 1996-2000, where THF entered into cooperation with the Lhasa City Cultural Relics Office. The two partners jointly organized the upgrading of historic homes in the Barkor districts, a program later to be continued by the Lhasa municipality on their own basis with central government funding. Of particular importance, THF contributed to restoring the magnificent Meru Nyingpa temple behind the Jokhang. In the end, as a result and as a tangible success of their collaboration, the local government finally put their demolition plans on hold, placing 93 historic buildings under special protection. This fruitful and unusual collaboration, however, came to an abrupt end in 2000.

With the discontinuation and ensuing dismissal from Lhasa proper, André and THF extended their activities to other areas of Tibet (Amdo and Khams, Qinghai, Sichuan), and even to the old city of Beijing (Hutong renovation), to Mongolia and throughout the Tibetan cultural domain of the Himalaya dotted with Tibetan architectural sites. In 2003 and 2004, a small THF team conducted a survey of Old Leh, reviewing the state of its buildings. In 2006, THF and the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council signed an agreement to work together to preserve historic Leh. THF also co-operated with local people to establish the Leh Old Town Initiative (LOTI), which is registered as an NGO under the India Society Act. Since then, André and his THF team worked on a series of restoration projects in Leh and Tsatsapuri (Alchi). In 2007, THF and the Anjuman Moin ul-Islam Society cooperated on the restoration of Leh's oldest mosque, the Masjid Sharif in the Tsa Soma garden in the Chutayrangtak area of the old town. With the help of Intach J&K, the idea to build a museum on the site was developed—the first proper museum in Leh. Designed by André and constructed with the help of the Habitat Unit of the University of Technology (Berlin), the idea was to publicise the Central Asian trade routes, of which Ladakh had been an important crossroad, and which had lasting influence on the development of Ladakh's unique culture. The museum is due to officially open in 2012.

In 2010, Sem Hope Leezum, daughter of Sikkim Chogyal Palden Thondup Namgyal (1923-1982), invited André Alexander to Gangtok. They soon decided to restore the royal Tsuglakhang, one of Gangtok's central Buddhist temples. It was built in the late 1920's, and the wall-paintings were done under the supervision of the 9th Panchen Lama's painter. The murals were sponsored by the 11th Chogyal, Sir Tashi Namgyal (1893-1963) and planned by his half-brother Tharing Rinpoche (1886-1947). Some time after Sikkim joined the Union of India, Palace and Tsuglakhang were handed over to a non-profit trust. The wall-paintings had become extremely soiled from soot (butter lamps) and had considerably darkened from a varnish applied decades ago. A project to restore the paintings of the Tsuglakhang, as a first restoration project in Sikkim, was successfully carried out in 2011. André was to return to Sikkim in the spring of 2012 in order to start work on the restoration of a number of monasteries and *mani lhakhangs* that had been damaged by the 18 September 2011 earthquake. In the short time that he spent in Sikkim, André managed to create awareness for preservation and was already spearheading Sikkim's nascent conservation movement.



The newly completed Tsuglakhang, June 1931¹

¹ Photograph: Williamson Collection, Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge.

Over the years, as the work of THF had become better known and their activities expanded across Central Asia, it received funding from UNESCO, the Network for Norway-Tibet University Cooperation, the Shalu Association, Misereor, the Heinrich-Böll-Foundation, the Price Claus Fund and many others. It received an UNHabitat Dubai Best Practice Award, three UNESCO Heritage Awards, the Global Vision Award, an award by Qinghai Golok Prefecture Government (2004), and a selection for the BBC television series on “Heritage Heroes” in 2011.

On the scholarly side, André’s publications include *The Temples of Lhasa* (Serindia, 2005, volume one of THF’s conservation inventory), and as co-author *A Manual of Traditional Mongolian Architecture* (THF, 2005), *Beijing Hutong Conservation Study* (2004, Beijing Communications Press), and *The Old City of Lhasa*, Vol. 1 (THF, 1998) and Vol. 2 (THF, 1999) as well as countless field reports and articles.

In recent years, his commitments having multiplied, André was incessantly active, occasionally teaching courses about traditional Tibetan architecture at Berlin University of Technology, in-between living at project sites in the Himalayas (Ladakh, Sikkim and Bhutan), and completing his dissertation, which was successfully defended in 2011.

A number of still unpublished books now await publication, including his doctoral study on vernacular housing and architecture in Lhasa (the second volume of THF’s conservation inventory based upon materials collected by THF) due to appear in 2012 with Serindia Publications. A large study on Tibetan imperial architecture edited jointly with Per K. Sørensen with the title *Empire Road* is underway. When published, this large study will serve as an appropriate homage to the legacy of André and his vision of THF.

André was a very colorful, unconventional and inspirational personality, very much respected by a large number of people. With his warm-hearted and winning nature and his fearlessness, his vision and engagement, he touched the heart of everyone who met him, sharing their admiration of his practical and entrepreneurial talent that achieved so much with limited means and against countless odds. Yet notwithstanding the painful loss of its founder and mentor, the co-directors of THF, Pimpim de Azevedo, Yutaka Hirako and Sylvester Kaben are determined to continue the important work of THF. Information about THF’s work and laudable mission can be found at www.tibetheritagefund.org

An appeal has been launched for well-wishers to contribute to THF

to express their respect for André and his work in order to provide emergency funding for the local craftspeople working with THF across the Tibetan world, and to maintain the conservation and disaster recovery projects initiated by THF in Yushu (Jyekundo), Ladakh and in Sikkim. Details for donations are at:

<http://www.tibetheritagefund.org/pages/support-thf.php>

*We are all workmen: prentice, journeyman, or master,
building you - you towering nave.
And sometimes there will come to us a grave wayfarer,
who like a radiance thrills
the souls of all our hundred artisans,
trembling as he shows us a new skill.*

Rainer-Maria Rilke