



TIBETAN ARCHITECTURE: THE STRUCTURE, AESTHETICS AND SYMBOLISM OF WOOD

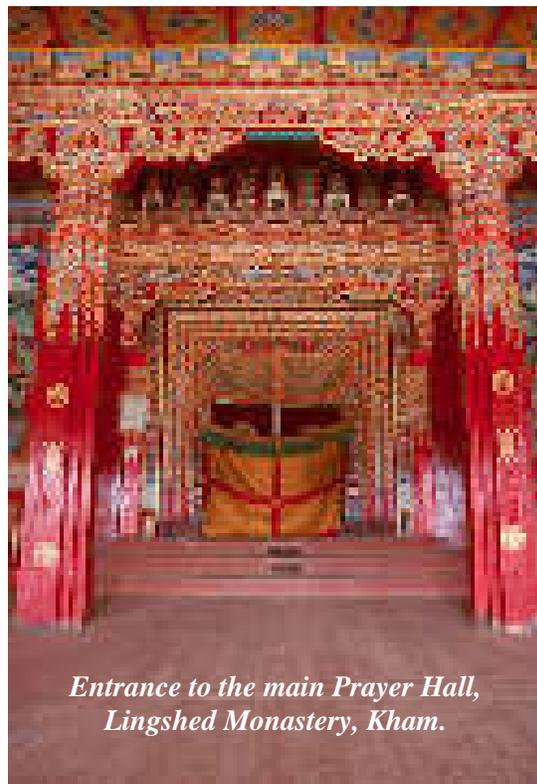
Bill Semple, BES, MED, MRAIC

The architecture of Tibet is typical of the buildings of central Asia. Tibetan buildings, particularly the monasteries, are monolithic by nature and often sited to command dramatic views over the surrounding countryside. While the exterior walls are constructed of rammed earth, mud block or stone with few openings and topped by flat roofs, the interior structure is made up of a rectilinear system of wood columns, capitals and beams. This framing methodology in turn carries a stratified flooring system of smaller wooden members and compacted mud, creating an intricately layered interior structure. Each layer is important both structurally and symbolically, with the number of layers also reflective of the importance of the place.

Wood has been used in a number of ways in the traditional buildings of many cultures throughout the world. Its value as a material often goes beyond structural and aesthetic attributes to include important symbolic qualities. In the high, dry countryside of the Tibetan plateau where wood is a limited resource, its use plays an important role in the structure, aesthetics and religious symbolism of traditional Tibetan buildings.

The symbolic significance of the building components is demonstrated both in the important status that the traditional builders had in the society and in the many rituals and ceremonies which are part of the building process. These ceremonies are performed by local monks when different parts of the building are completed and when special components are erected. For example, when the first column is erected, a special ceremony to "observe a good omen" is performed.

The symbolic importance of the timber frame structure is reinforced by the use of numerology, which is prevalent in Tibetan Buddhist teachings, in the design of the structure. Particularly significant is the number three, which represents the three levels of existence, according to Tibetan Buddhist philosophy, as well as the triad of the Buddhist religious order: the teacher (the Buddha), the teachings (the Dharma) and the religious community (the Sangha). This proportional hierarchy appears in the construction of the columns and capitals which support the heavy timber floor beams and in the three levels of the temple. The column and capital are made up of



*Entrance to the main Prayer Hall,
Lingshed Monastery, Kham.*

three wooden members, with the column supporting a capital made up of two pieces, of which the first piece, called the *shu-chung*, supports the second and top piece, called the *shu-chen*.

In both the Tibetan temple and dwelling, these framing members are also richly decorated with carved and painted motifs, giving them a special status within the iconography of Tibetan architecture. In the temple, the column is often carved in plan view in the shape of

To see Bill Semple's fascinating colour slide show 'Tibetan Spaces—An Architectural Journey', please join us on Friday evening, June 13th for a slide show, snacks and tea as well as a silent auction. See the insert for more details.

(Continued from page 1)

a mandala, which to the Buddhists represents an energy field, and the capital is usually painted red, representing control. The first piece of the capital is painted green to represent action, and is intricately carved with an ornament called *Norbu Gakyl*, which symbolizes the balance of wisdom and action. On top of this, the second piece is painted red and heavily carved with various Tibetan motifs such as lotus flowers and clouds.

The use of numerology and symbolism also appears in the wooden trim details around windows and in the framing members which support the canopies over windows. For example, the cubular wooden carving detail found on the window trim, called a *cho-tsek*, represents the layers of the dharma texts (the teachings of the Buddha). The structural support for the canopy, known as a



Calling to prayer—Monks playing long horns on the roof of Lingshed Monastery in Ladakh.

kashing, as in the numerology of the column and capital, is supported by a series of three cantilevered wooden members. This use of numerology is combined with the use of colour, so that each framing member builds upon itself both structurally and symbolically.

While the Buddhist scriptures contain teachings which detail the spiritual significance of the temples and their construction, historically there were no books explaining the Tibetan building tradition. The training of future builders was an oral one, passed through the generations from father to son. In a climate where wood is a scarce commodity, it was the skills of the carpenters themselves which led to the development of a structural system utilizing a series of smaller pieces of wood. Their carving skills also enhanced the link between structural logic, architectural decoration and religious symbolism, in the architecture of both the dwellings and the great monasteries of the region.



Lingshed Monastery, Kham (Eastern Tibet).

Message from your Executive *Hart Jansson, Vice-President - for the OFT Executive*

We are very excited about developments this year. The *Spirit of Tibet* event that we co-sponsored with the Palyul Namdroling Foundation at the National Library on March 10th was very successful. Over 100 people attended this video presentation and celebration of Tibetan culture. Net funds raised by Ottawa Friends of Tibet (OFT) were over \$2000. Our upcoming *Tibetan Spaces – an Architectural Journey* (June 13th at the Ottawa Public Library) will be our 2nd event and of course we will hold our 7th annual dinner in the fall. This will be the first time that Ottawa Friends of Tibet has held three major events in one year.

On the project front, the orphanage near Lhasa continues to thrive with over 20 children. The Maitreya Foundation

(Continued on page 3)



has 10 children at their home near Delhi. Our President, Jurme Wangda, will travel to Dharamsala, Kalimpong and Sikkim in June to progress the Kalimpong Seniors Home project. Our volunteer architect, Bill Semple, is scheduled to go to Kalimpong to work on architectural design for the Seniors Home in the fall. The endorsement letter from the Office of His Holiness the Dalai Lama (on page four of this newsletter) shows the support we are receiving for this project to benefit destitute seniors.

I will be moving to Oakville in the summer. It has been a pleasure for me to work with the dedicated volunteers who make OFT vibrant and useful. I will continue to contribute from afar, but it just won't be the same. Do yourself a favour and discover a fascinating perspective on the Tibetan people at the **Tibetan Spaces** event and please also mark your calendars for **the 7th Annual Dinner on November 8th** – we will have the Gaden Jangtse monks performing, this will be a very rare and fascinating treat.

Biography of Jurme Wangda, President of the Ottawa Friends of Tibet

Jn 1996, Jurme Wangda, along with his wife Angela and a few volunteers, founded the Ottawa Friends of Tibet (OFT) to provide financial support for communities in Tibet and Tibetan refugees in India and Nepal. Wangda tells us that his inspiration to help the Tibetan people and to contribute something from his culture to Canadians arose soon after his arrival in Canada: "Coming to Canada from the East, Canada was a beautiful country – the people, culture, and environment. When I arrived, I could have just lived my life, but as a Tibetan, I felt I needed to do something. The Western world was economically prosperous, and I had a good opportunity, but what could I do? I was neither rich nor wise, but I felt the need to do something. The best way I felt to help would be to set up an organization to aid Tibetans in need. The Ottawa Friends of Tibet emphasize preserving culture and heritage, and we want to contribute the philosophy of non-violence and interdependency that is part of the Tibetan culture, to the Canadian culture. We wish to share this knowledge with our Canadian friends as well as help Tibetans."

From his boyhood in Tibet, where he was set on becoming a monk, to his current life with his family in a quiet Ottawa suburb, Wangda's path has wound

through an intriguing landscape. In 1959, with many of his people, he left Tibet for India, where he attended a school set up by His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Government-in-Exile. Around this time he became interested in martial arts: "I learned a number of martial arts as a hobby—Karate, Aikido, Judo, especially Judo. I found that Judo was very much like the Tibetan way of thinking, and it could easily blend into the Tibetan culture." Wangda followed this interest to Japan in 1965, where he studied for ten years. He was awarded a Bachelor of Arts & Education from the Nippon Health and Education University in Tokyo, and received his teaching license in 1975.

In 1977 Wangda's expertise took him to Dharamsala, where he taught martial arts techniques to the security guards of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, serving as a bodyguard himself from 1978 to 1984. "Working with His Holiness was very energizing," says Wangda. "He would teach for weeks, even for a month, sometimes all day for a week, and we would sit all day. The time went by very quickly, which happens when you enjoy what you do." During these years, Wangda also served as a Welfare Officer in the Tibetan Government-in-Exile Administration of Education and Community Integration Programs for Refugee Settlements, resolving conflicts be-

tween the Indian and Tibetan communities in Dharamsala.

Wangda met his wife Angela, a Canadian, in Kathmandu, Nepal, where she was teaching physiotherapy. They were married in Dharamsala in 1990, and in 1991 came to live in Ottawa. Both enrolled in the Master's program in Rehabilitation Therapy at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, and received their Master of Science degrees in 1996. In the midst of this studying, Wangda and Angela managed to find time to become parents to two girls named Lodoe and Tenzin. From 1993 to 1996, Wangda practised as a physiotherapy technician at the Ottawa General Hospital. In 1996, in a radical change of pace and scene, he enjoyed a brief stint as a movie star in his role as prime minister of Tibet in Martin Scorsese's movie *Kundun*. (Yes, you have seen him somewhere before!)

More recently, from 1997 to 2001, Wangda served as Director of Information and International Affairs at the Liaison Office of H.H. the Dalai Lama for Japan and East Asia. Presently, he assists with Tibetan translation, teaching, curriculum development and teacher training in Nepal and India for the School for International Training in Vermont, U.S.A., teaches Judo at an Ottawa school, and carries out the many duties associated with his role as President of the OFT.



Ottawa Friends of Tibet
1098 Karsh Street
Ottawa, Ontario
K1G 4P9

Phone: 613-738-9871
Email: JWangda@cyberus.ca
Website: www.ofc.ca
Charitable #: 87685 9919
RR0001

བྱུ་ཤེས་ལོག་པུ



Secretary to
HIS HOLINESS THE DALAI LAMA

Mr. Jurme Wanda - President
Ottawa Friends of Tibet, 1098 Karsh Street
Ottawa, Ontario K1G 4P9

May 27, 2002

Dear Jurme Wanda la,

Thank you very much for your kind letter along with the Newsletter and brochure with Objectives of OFT. I went through them and felt excited that OFT has great objectives in order to help old and young with both financial and moral support. It is wonderful that OFT is also working in conjunction with other aid agencies providing scholarships and medical care for the poor and needy. I would like to take this opportunity to express our deep sense of appreciation for all the wonderful work that OFT has been doing.

Let me refer to our discussion about the old people's home for aged and needy Tibetans at Kalimpong. It was a fruitful meeting and you have already mentioned about the project in the Newsletter. I have the pleasure to tell you that His Holiness was very pleased to learn about this project and that Ottawa Friends of Tibet is willing to finance the construction of the building. Accordingly, our Office and the Home Department have already paid for the land. Mr. Losang Nyima, Minister for Home