Conciliating Tradition and Modernity in Upper Mustang

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Article disponible dans les actes du colloque Terra 2016:

Abstract

Introduction: Description of the overall context, history and cultural identity of Lo Manthang and Upper Mustang, Nepal.

1. Unique cultural landscape and traditional earthen architecture: description of the state of conservation, integrity and authenticity of the Medieval Earthen Walled City of Lo Manthang and analysis of threats caused by modernity and climate change.


3. Awareness –raising on the values of traditional architecture and their pertinence with regard to climate change: possible solutions: identification and description.


5. Conclusion, lessons learnt and future perspectives

INTRODUCTION – OVERALL CONTEXT – HISTORY – CULTURAL IDENTITY

Overall context - Located North of Nepal in the Himalayas, Mustang includes the Kali Gandaki River Valley and has its own language, religion (Tibetan Buddhism and pagan rituals) and tradition. High mountains and a harsh climate produce a semi-arid and spectacular landscape. Close to Tibet (China) the capital Lo Manthang remained isolated until recently as a track allows today trucks to deliver goods which impact its lifestyle. Its population migrates South during winter to sell handicrafts, Tibetan medicines or to study. A significant number of inhabitants emigrate to the USA or the Arab Gulf. They rarely return home thus depriving the community from its youth and threatening the transmission of ancestral traditions.

History - Numerous caves attest human occupation since 2,800 B.C. Buddhism spread from Tibet from the 7th century A.C. Mustang became part of the Tibetan Kingdom until 1440, thereafter in dependent with Lo Manthang as its capital. In 1790 the Lo Kingdom was integrated into the Kingdom of Nepal. The king of Mustang, no longer the sovereign continues to be influential. In 1960, after the Chinese occupation of Tibet, China and Nepal signed an agreement closing the border between Tibet and Mustang. Tibetan fighters moved to Mustang to find shelter thus it was decided to close Mustang which remained isolated until 1992 when the government decided to give access to tourists by means of an expensive permit.

Cultural identity – The cultural identity of Mustang consists in its capacity to live with harsh conditions, in a grandiose and spiritual environment where religion is inscribed through carved rocks, chortens and prayer flags. Mustang is a unique survivor of an authentic Tibetan Buddhism expression. It keeps its secret and initiatory atmosphere. However while youth is strongly attracted to modernity it is also deeply enrooted in living intangible cultural heritage traditions.
1. UNIQUE CULTURAL LANDSCAPE AND TRADITIONAL EARTHEN ARCHITECTURE

In 2008, Lo Manthang founded in the 15\textsuperscript{th} century A.D., with its medieval palace and monasteries (two from the 15\textsuperscript{th} and one from the 18\textsuperscript{th} century A.D.) was inscribed by the Nepalese government on the Tentative List of Nepal for potential World Heritage nomination. The national recognition of its uniqueness and potential Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) as ancient Buddhist heritage thus became official. Upper Mustang is considered today as one of the last authentic testimonies of Tibetan Buddhist culture and pagan rituals (Bon-po) in a strong syncretism.

In addition to the Medieval Earthen Walled City of Lo Manthang it is hoped that the World Heritage nomination process will take into account a wider area of the cultural landscape surrounding it. The site could become an associative cultural landscape as ancient cave temples, carved rocks and chortens shape this distinctive landscape. Also, this cultural landscape was used as a trade (salt) and cultural corridor linking the Tibetan Plateau in the North with the Gangetic Plains in the South and with the Silk Roads.

1.1 Description, integrity and authenticity

This cultural landscape is a unique combination of an arid mountainous environment with ingenious irrigation systems and earthen architecture. Flat roofs covered with juniper bushes used to heat homes in the winter season, strong winds blowing daily in prayer flags, bright green barley fields fenced with pebble walls, a chromatic harmony between earthen architecture and neighboring red cliffs, all this constitutes a unique cultural landscape which deserves to be preserved and transmitted for future generations.

![Fig. 1 Cultural Landscape of Upper Mustang](image)

The walled city of Lo Manthang sits on a plateau surrounded with desert and snowy mountains. It strikes visitors after several days of trek as it appears to be almost unreal. Above the wall are the white palace and three major temples painted in red. Some fields
surround the plateau terrace as a green mosaic in the warm season. According to the Tibetan Buddhist conception, the landscape abides to a vertical hierarchy: mountains are the realm of gods while valleys host human activities. Three colors correspond to a chromatic division of space: white for gods, yellow ochre like soil and rocks of the plateau for men and blue for the under-world divinities and waters. Lo Manthang embodies all these elements and brings proof that its location was carefully selected.

1.2 State of conservation – Threats: Modernity and climate change

Until recently (1960s), the Medieval Earthen Walled City of Lo Manthang was intact. Since the recent construction of the sand and gravel track linking it to South and to the North (Tibetan border at 18km distance), traffic has developed considerably and modernization accelerated.

The fortified wall (chagri) marks symbolically and physically the limits of the city. It used to be closed at night. Also, it protects inhabitants and cattle against the harsh winter winds and cold and had a defensive role against invaders. Another role is religious as the wall draws the limit between the sacred city and the outside world, the realm of demons. The wall has also an economic dimension as it is meant to manage scarce resources for the survival of the community in extreme environmental conditions. A marker of the Lo identity the wall embodies the belonging of inhabitants to the Lo community. The chagri has a social role as some lower casts which are not allowed to live within the wall live below the plateau where the city is built. Structurally the wall is the limit to the city but it is also intrinsically part of some 70 civil or religious buildings associated structurally with it. Nowadays the wall is more a symbol of tradition than a defensive asset.

Fig. 2 The Medieval Earthen Walled City of Lo Manthang

The wall measures 259m by 148m, it is 8,55m high and 1,5m wide at its base. It counts 13 rectangular towers including 6 angle towers called dzong. Towers are 10-12meters high and sometimes include doors. Dzong tops count parapets which are painted with red when the inside building is religious or black when a noble house is to be found behind. The wall
foundations are made of river pebbles assembled without mortar over which rammed clay is laid. The upper part of the wall is made of pop bricks. The wall is left in its natural color except for its limits of religious buildings which are painted in red. It includes at its top a covered way made with slate. Only monasteries and palace are higher than the chagni. The whole wall except in the North is surrounded by a 10m distant mādang(1,20m high wall), for prayers and circumambulation.

Fig. 3. The Medieval Earthen Wall – Chagri

Until 1960 the wall of the city counted only one door. Over time, owners of houses built against the wall opened 27 additional doors which threaten the very structure of the wall and perturb the Buddhist circum-ambulation around it. After 1960 life was allowed outside of the wall. Physical degradations of the wall followed. In the 1990s, the Western wall of Choede Monastery collapsed to be followed by the collapse of the Eastern wall in 1999 due to a bad drainage. In 2003 another part of the wall fell. Other zones are also threatened. In 2016, a new wide opening was made by Choede Monastery to allow vehicles through.

Fig. 4. 2016 Chagri opening at Choede Monastery
Today buildings appear outside the Medieval Earthen Walled City thus threatening the view from the pass overlooking the landscape of Lo Manthang and the overall identity of the site. Trucks drive and park close to the chagri and may threaten its structure. In 2016 a luxury hotel built in concrete on the plateau was inaugurated. It imitates the traditional architecture although its height exceeds the traditional volume of buildings.

![Luxury hotel built in 2016](image)

**Fig. 5 Luxury hotel built in 2016**

2- A QUEST FOR MODERNITY – MISCONCEPTIONS: IMPACT ON TRADITIONAL EARTHEN ARCHITECTURE: THE EXAMPLE OF THE MEDIEVAL EARTHEN WALLED CITY OF LO MANTHANG

To repair their dwellings, inhabitants use cement which is imported from China. Combined with earthen traditional architecture, cement is unsustainable as it deteriorates and cracks rapidly due to the difference in temperature between day and night, winter and summer. Also cement is inappropriate in terms of thermal insulation. Furthermore, the cost of cement transportation in difficult conditions along the track makes it almost a luxury good. As such it becomes a symbol of social status. This sign of wealth attracts those in the Lo community who wish to show ostensibly their prosperity. Cement appears in almost every part of the city: door steps, walls, window frames, etc.

Another misconception is that what symbolizes modernity and comfort is cement or concrete. Right angles and a perfect aspect are signs of perfection and modernity. Purchasing modern building materials even at a high expense is preferred to obtaining all traditional building materials from the natural environment (juniper bushes, mud, clay, pebbles). Wood is extremely costly. Its use is limited to a minimum. However since the 2015 earthquakes new buildings tend to combine wood, pebbles, cement and polythene sheets (for waterproof roofs).
3- AWARENESS-RAISING ON THE VALUES OF TRADITIONAL ARCHITECTURE AND THEIR PERTINENCE WITH REGARD TO CLIMATE CHANGE AND MODERN COMFORT

To convince the community that cement is not the proper answer to decay as it is not adapted to climate change and seismic prone region sand does not guarantee sustainability is an ambitious endeavor which will take time. Awareness-raising appears to be a major tool to change conceptions of the Lo community. Reducing the use of cement is an issue and the transmission of local crafts and techniques a priority.

Climate change has already impacted the Himalayas. Fewer rainfalls (161mm/year), colder winters (-20°C) and milder summers (8-20°C) make life even more difficult. Strong winds blow South to North in the warm season, North to South during winter. Agriculture is the main occupation of the Lo community. Only one harvest is made under these conditions. Traditional materials are also impacted by climate change. Earthen architecture is more vulnerable to rain if it follows a dry period. Maintenance of earthen walls made of pebbles, pop bricks and clay is problematic as the population ages and diminishes due to youth emigration.

From this review, it was decided by a small non-governmental organization (NGO) named the Oriental Cultural Heritage Sites Protection Alliance (OCHSPA) to design a workshop gathering young students from Lo Manthang (Lopa) and students in architecture and the history of art from three major Kathmandu universities. The idea was to show the group a number of restored traditional houses in Patan, Kathmandu. These houses would be presented by their owners in order for the group to interact with them. The owners would share with students the reasons why they wished to restore their traditional houses and how they managed to implement their restoration projects. Also it would allow the group to understand the constraints, issues and benefits of restoration. Finally it would show the group that restoration techniques and motivations may vary from one house to another. Some houses are restored in an orthodox manner while others are restored differently using a combination of traditional and modern techniques.


4.1 Methodology

Organized by OCHSPA this workshop counted 20 participants: 6 students from Lo Manthang designed 4 micro-projects which they would consider a top priority to implement in their city. Other participants were students from Khowopa Engineering College (Kathmandu), Tribhuvan University Department of Architecture and Engineering (Kathmandu) and Lumbini Buddhist University in Kathmandu.
Theoretical information about adaptive re-use was provided and the qualities of traditional materials were stressed. Brick and mud are inexpensive re-usable environmentally friendly materials which have proven their sustainability over time especially in seismic prone areas. However, today modernity consists in cement, concrete and the social status of traditional housing and craftsmanship is low in Nepal. The overall reflection was about how to mitigate the erroneous current conception of traditional housing and how to apply this methodology to Lo Manthang community.

Participants visited a dozen restored traditional houses in Patan, Kathmandu, in order to study different approaches using traditional materials or not. They met with the owners and discussed the benefits and constraints of restoration. The cost of restoration with traditional materials was studied as well as ways to obtain support from sponsors. Meeting owners allowed interactive sessions. Students were able to understand the owners’ motivation for restoration. Although most of the owners decided to restore their houses in order to transform them into tourist guest-houses, thus not living in their traditional homes any longer, students were interested by these case-studies. This exercise was an introduction to the following one consisting of adapting these techniques to the Medieval Earthen Walled City of Lo Manthang.
Four teams were set up with Lopa students as their leaders. Each team designed a micro-project adapted to the context of Lo Manthang.

Four micro-projects were presented to a jury composed of Rohit Ranjitkar, Director, Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust (KVPT), Prof. Neel Kamal Chapagain, Ph. D., Assistant Professor, Centre for Heritage Management at Ahmedabad University (India), Prof. Susanne von der Heide, Kathmandu University and HimalAsia Foundation. These micro-projects consisted of 1/Built heritage of Lo Manthang: inventory and documentation for community awareness-raising, 2/Creation of a parking lot close to Lo Manthang, 3/Inventory and documentation of intangible cultural heritage of Lo Manthang and 4/Creating tourism home stay facilities in Lo Manthang.

4.2 Results of the first micro-project elaboration: Built heritage of Lo Manthang: Inventory and documentation for community awareness-raising

Introduction: This project analyzes the causes of the deterioration of Lo Manthang built heritage: neglect, leakage, loss of know-how in masonry and traditional techniques. Use of modern materials is being preferred to traditional ones. Objectives include 1/Awareness-raising and motivation of the local community, 2/Use of traditional materials and techniques and 3/Involvement of local masons.

The reasons justifying these objectives are 1/Misconceptions about modern materials, 2/Lack of awareness of local materials features and qualities and 3/Water seepage through roofs and leakage through walls.

The methodology which will be used consists of 1/Using a mix of traditional and modern materials such as ‘pang’ (mud and vegetation), bentonite clay (‘Tsharangkeisa’) and polyethylene sheets, 2/Inventorying and mapping leakages in the Medieval Earthen Walled City of Lo Manthang, testing and building prototypes. Thereafter documenting the best technical solutions and 3/Working in the longer term with local associations (Youth Club and Mothers’/Women Association).

Questions and issues raised by the jury were about how will the team convince local masons? Community local carpenters-builders have almost disappeared as there is only one left who retired in recent years. He should be part of the project in order to train a new generation of traditional carpenters-builders.

After the workshop OCHSPA reported to the Nepalese Department of Archaeology (DoA) who is responsible for all actions in heritage sites such as the walled city of Lo Manthang. A group expedition with students and professors was planned in May-June 2015 to implement these micro-projects with the presence of a representative of DoA. However due to the major earthquakes that occurred in spring of 2015 this expedition was postponed until spring of 2016.

4.3. After the 2015 earthquakes: A new era

Even if the 2015 earthquakes dramatically affected the project, OCHSPA believes that its methodology has already changed these 20 students’ conception. A multiplying effect could be achieved as 6 of these students are members of the Lopa community. Local connections are crucial in the awareness-raising of the local community. Furthermore, after the earthquakes local leaders witnessed the sustainability of traditional techniques with regard to climate change and seismic prone zones. Also, restoring traditional houses...
to accommodate tourists reinforces local pride for tradition. Finally realizing the fact that restoring traditions brings resources such as tourism is certainly a valuable tool to reduce poverty. This is a decisive element for local leaders to prescribe the use of local building techniques in the community of Lo Manthang.

In May 2016 a mission to Lo Manthang was organized by the Department of Archaeology (DoA) with the technical support of OCHSPA. Along the track up to the Medieval Earthen Walled City of Lo Manthang, OCHSPA drew the attention of the DoA on the secrecy of Upper Mustang tradition. It is hidden in caves containing mural paintings, clay or metal statues, wooden toranas (tympanums) and manuscripts.

Also, cultural landscapes defined as the “combined works of nature and of man”, in the Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention are found everywhere in Mustang. It was stressed firstly that Mustang should be considered as a unique cultural landscape which cannot be limited to the sole Medieval Earthen Walled City of Lo Manthang; and secondly that the national authorities would not be capable to document this exceptional cultural landscape without support and participation of the local community.

Once in Lo Manthang the DoA organized with OCHSPA a public meeting associating all representatives of every district (tole) of the city. During this meeting the DoA explained why it is important for the local community to collaborate with the national authorities in order to document and inventory the traditional features constituting the Lo culture. In the recent past (2013-2015) the Lopa community had been reluctant to assist national authorities as it considered that it had been ignored over the past thirty years when its territory was closed. During this meeting the basic principles of inventorying techniques were explained as well as the benefits of documenting cultural properties. Access to the governmental database by the Lopa community was guaranteed. The security of recording in a governmental database in case of theft was put forward as it will attest the ownership of cultural assets if found later on the market. Also, obtaining technical and financial assistance from the government to restore damaged public properties was conditioned by the documentation of these properties.
The local community agreed in starting an inventory exercise under the supervision of the DoA on the following day, after a training session on basic principles of inventory. The exercise was performed by a dozen youth who chose a shorten inside the Medieval Earthen Walled City which had been damaged during the 2015 earthquakes. A growing audience eager to witness this first collaboration with the national authorities followed the exercise. A new era in the relations between the Lopa community and the governmental authorities started on this very day.
5 – CONCLUSION AND PERSPECTIVES

In the 21st century one should always bear in mind that if it takes longer for national authorities to associate local communities with their work, it is also more sustainable. The 2014 workshop and 2016 mission are just first experimental steps to raise the awareness of the Lopa community about the value of its traditions through their unique adaptability to climate and seismic risks. It is also an original initiative let the local community understand that the built environment of Lo Manthang while being vulnerable should be protected as a precious asset to attract tourism.

While the 2015 earthquakes were human tragedies they allowed a true awareness about the significance of cultural heritage as a marker for the resilience of affected communities. They also drew the attention of the government that reconstruction needed intangible know-how and techniques that were greatly at threat. This can be considered as a unique opportunity to design public policies to revitalize traditional craftsmanship and train new generations of carpenters, masons and sculptors.

Bibliography


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Author’s Biodata

Marielle Richon was Programme Specialist at the World Heritage Centre of UNESCO from 2000 to 2012. Since 2013, she has been OCHSPA (Oriental Cultural Heritage Sites Protection Alliance) Project Leader for Nepal and coordinates various projects implemented by this NGO in Nepal. She is a member of ICOMOS France.