



## **LHASA REPORT**

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## A REPORT FROM LHASA WORLD HERITAGE SITE IN SEPTEMBER 2002

The mission took place 12-15 September 2002 as an extension of CHwB's participation in Tibet Heritage Fund's restoration of the Beri Monastery in the province of Chengdu, China. The main goal was to explore needs, local interests and possibilities for an eventual Swedish cooperation in restorations of the built heritage of Lhasa.

### Comments on the situation of the built heritage

The first impression of Lhasa is still impressive. The Potala Palace dominates beautifully.

I had three days in Lhasa in September at my disposal trying to get an impression of the condition of the built heritage. The Potala Palace complex as well as the Barkhor district is on the World Heritage List. Consequently these areas have less visible changes than other parts of the city. Some parts are, however, not maintained and quickly dilapidating, especially the Shöl village within the walls of the Potala Palace.

Of the old traditional buildings in Lhasa the ones in the Barkor district seemed best preserved. This is within the intermediate kora, which also is the most important devotional route in Lhasa and the main market in the old town. The whole area is at the same time endangered by poor infrastructure and poor sanitary conditions. The main building in the Barkor district is the Jokhang Temple, from the 7<sup>th</sup> century. The temple is so overpopulated with rats that one can even see them running across the rooms and over the Buddha Statues!



*The cleared space in front of the Jokhang Temple.*

The Old town of Lhasa does not consist of the Barkor district only but of a much wider area of the same importance and of similar urban and architectural richness. This area is about ten times Barkor district in size and borders to the southeast by the outer kora, the Lingkor ring that all together extends about 7 km around Lhasa. This area is unfortunately not included in the world heritage site. A strong recommendation would be that it should be included in the protection zone in order to secure the complexity and wholeness of this large unique urban space. Within this area one will find most of the traditional housing and urban complexes. The size is impressive and one can imagine how beautiful it once was before the ongoing reconstruction began. While most streets are still there and the scale is only partly changed by higher buildings, the architectural values are, however, largely destroyed by many new

additions. The new buildings are 'Tibetan' in a sad way. They are a little too big and often one or two storeys higher than before. What is even worse is the cheap way of building in concrete using stones in the facade merely as decoration but not as a structural material and with dimensions different from the traditional building methods. All stones have the same size compared to the traditional way of building with a larger stone layer in between two or three layers of smaller stones. This is assumed to resist movements in case of earthquake and it certainly gives a character to the buildings. Traditionally all mortar and plaster used were made from clay, which give much better isolation towards cold and heat when compared with concrete.



*A new building along the Barkor Kora.*

To get an impression of the speed of the vanishing of the authentic buildings adjacent to the Barkor district I examined 7 buildings from the 'Lhasa Atlas' by Larsen & Sinding-Larsen. One of them was being partly demolished as the book was written, one was being badly rebuilt now, one was intact and the other ones were gone. The fieldwork for the book was done between 1995 and 1999. These facts prove that my impression of the loss of the original buildings in the Old Town of Lhasa is much higher than 50 %.

In this intimate urban scale all details are of greatest importance. To use skilful craftsmen and same or similar material is important to avoid the risk of the new buildings looking cheap in a traditional context. This is unfortunately what Lhasa is facing now, and with the rapid destruction going on at the moment soon there will be no authentic building to show how it once looked. The buildings in the town will instead be replaced with pastiches, technically poor as well.

My impression is, however, that the change is not caused by an urge to erase the Tibetan culture and tradition but a very ignorant view on preservation and renewal. Not only Tibetan culture is in danger, but the Chinese culture as well. At least, this is what I could judge by looking at the palaces and their surroundings in Beijing.



*Street in old Lhasa.*

Walking along the Barkor Kora...  
...modern additions of concrete are visible  
when glancing outwards.



*Original building along the Barkor Kora stands as a mere coulisse in front of modern replacements.*

...while the Barkor district is fairly well  
preserved.



*Looking into the Barkor district.*

A unique example of a traditional house that is important to preserve.



*Courtyard of a traditional building.*



Originally a housing complex like this was inhabited by an extended family. Today many families share this space.

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