

# THE LHASA HOUSE

TYPOLOGY OF AN ENDANGERED SPECIES



ANDRÉ ALEXANDER

VOLUME TWO OF TIBET HERITAGE FUND'S CONSERVATION INVENTORY



# THE LHASA HOUSE

Typology of an Endangered Species

by ANDRÉ ALEXANDER

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This book looks at a particular type of indigenous architecture that has developed in the Tibetan capital Lhasa. The focus is not on the relatively well documented monastic architecture, but rather on the vernacular residential architecture in the form of the historic Lhasa Town House, as it was built and lived in from the mid-17th to mid-20th century. The book defines the Lhasa House as a distinct variety of traditional Tibetan architecture by providing a technical analysis and discussing the cultural framework and the development of this endangered typology.

The author, André Alexander, is one of the most highly regarded scholars of Tibetan Architecture. He was founder and co-director of the Tibet Heritage Fund, an NGO engaged in conservation projects spread across large parts of Asia. His career as a researcher and inspiring practitioner ended in 2012 through his unexpected death in Berlin. The publication of his research on the vernacular Lhasa House may help to make his rich understanding accessible to a wider audience - particularly at a time when Tibetan vernacular architecture continues to be subject to wholesale demolition.





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The Tibetan capital of Lhasa is more than just a city of timber and stone, glass and steel. For centuries, Lhasa's prestige and influence as both cradle and centre of Tibetan Buddhism gave it a pivotal role within Tibetan civilisation. As the events of March 2008 have shown, contemporary Lhasa is a deeply troubled place, and questions of cultural identity play no small part in the conflicts of interest behind the troubles.

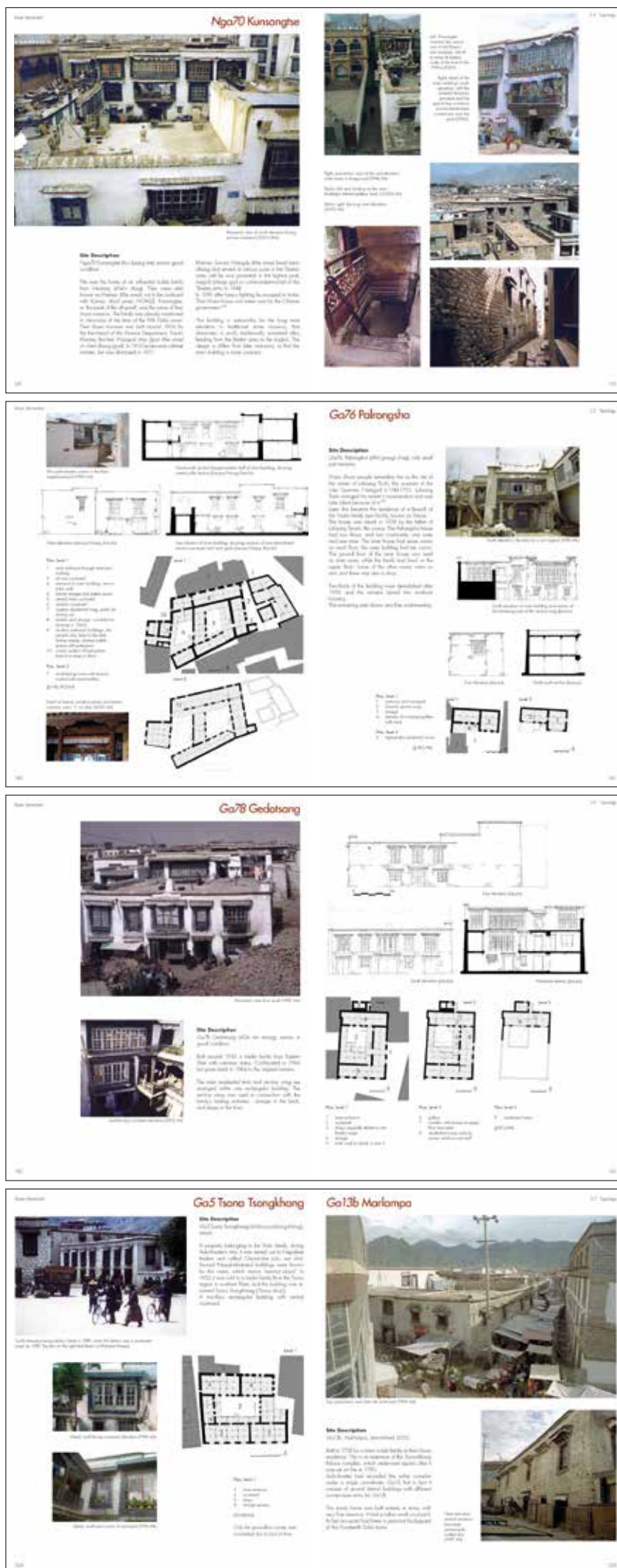
The present work examines a particular indigenous type of architecture that has developed in the Tibetan capital. This is not the somewhat more well-known monastic architecture of Lhasa (already described in an earlier study). This book is concerned with the traditional vernacular architecture, in the form of the historic Lhasa Town House, as it was built and lived in from the mid-17th to the mid-20th centuries. The traditional society that created the Lhasa House abruptly ended with the fundamental events of the year 1959.

According to the earliest existing proper survey of the city, Lhasa in 1948 consisted of around 700 traditional Tibetan town houses, a small city by any standards. In 1993, little more than 300 of these remained. By January 2010, this had dwindled to less than 100.

The present work aims to define the Lhasa House as a distinct variety of traditional Tibetan architecture by providing a technical analysis, discussion of the cultural framework and the development of a typology. It starts with an account of the circumstances under which data has been gathered on site and describes the available source materials and methodologies used (chapter 1). Next comes a brief overview of the spread of Tibetan civilisation and general information about Tibetan architecture, based on secondary sources and own observations (chapter 2).

The next chapter contains a detailed history of the city of Lhasa from its founding in the 7th century to the present day, compiled from both secondary and primary sources (chapter 3). The following chapter 4 contains an important part of new research, about the city and society of Lhasa around the time of the 1948 survey. It includes especially information about the organisation of artisans and the construction of traditional houses in Lhasa, based on hundreds of interviews conducted over period of nearly ten years. Chapter 5 forms the core of the work, architectural surveys, photographs and descriptions of 127 historic buildings, arranged in form of a typology. In chapter 6, the data is used to explain fundamental characteristics of structure and form of the Lhasa House. Chapter 7 describes the decline of the Lhasa House, though the enormous topic of modern China's policy towards historic architecture has been beyond the scope of the work.

The work concludes by summarising the cultural significance of Lhasa's architecture.







**André Alexander** was born André Teichman in 1965 in Berlin, where his background did little to suggest a future as a scholar. Although he studied History and then Architecture at university in the city, he did not complete his studies. Instead he was more interested in becoming a comic book artist: a favourite character was the sailor Corto Maltese, who he often emulated in dress.

Shortly after Tibet opened up for the first time to tourists in 1987, he travelled there as a backpacker. On October 1 that year he happened to be in the main square in Lhasa when the first major protest of the modern era broke out; he narrowly avoided being shot when police opened fire on the crowd, leaving 10 protesters dead.

Teichman (who wrote under his grandfather's surname, Alexander, and eventually adopted it as his own), gradually took a serious interest in Lhasa, spending extended periods there and paying attention to the physical fabric of its buildings. At that time the old city was still mostly preserved: "One could easily get lost in the narrow winding alleyways framed by low whitewashed stone buildings," he wrote. But as he returned, things changed. "On each subsequent visit, houses had vanished – stone by stone, block by block, alley by alley." Alexander became determined to draw the old city's buildings and to list their features: in 1993 he produced a complete inventory of every remaining historic home in Lhasa with British friend Andrew Brannan. This they compared with those structures on the hand-drawn map of the city produced in 1948 by Peter Aufschnaiter and Heinrich Harrer (whose celebrated sojourn in Lhasa is recounted in *Seven Years in Tibet*).

Alexander and Brannan's modern initiative, then called the Lhasa Archive Project, proved timely: of the more than 400 buildings they described in 1993, only 150 or so were still standing by 2001. The rest had been demolished in the frenzy of urban construction that characterised Chinese modernisation in those years, and which assumed – incorrectly, as Alexander showed – that concrete replica buildings would be more suitable for the climate and more popular than renovated traditional courtyard houses.

Alexander was not content with merely chronicling the loss of Tibetan heritage – he became committed to reversing it. In 1996, with the Portuguese artist Pimpim de Azevedo, and helped by the British Tibet scholar Heather Stoddard, he founded the Tibet Heritage Fund. It was under the banner of this organisation that he achieved what other Western experts had previously considered impossible: persuading, through charm and persistence, several leading officials in the Lhasa government to permit preservation work, despite the general reluctance of Chinese officials in Tibet to agree to cooperation with foreigners there.

Alexander's approach was entirely different from that of most conservationists, focusing not on state monuments but on buildings used by local Tibetans. He showed that such repair work could rejuvenate communities as well as their fabric. They located the few remaining Tibetan craftsmen in the city and raised funds to pay for younger Tibetans to learn the ancient Tibetan arts of building and construction. By 1998 they had created a workforce of up to 300 Tibetan craftsmen in the city, renovated 20 historic buildings, and persuaded the local government to list a total of 93 others as protected sites.

As the work of THF became better known, it received funding from the German government and UNESCO, among others. However, in 2000 the government in Lhasa (possibly because of growing international concern about its demolition programme) abruptly threw Alexander out of Tibet, replaced his workforce with its own team, and denied the Tibet Heritage Fund further permission to work there.

Alexander did not let this dismay him. Instead he applied himself to saving buildings, both religious and secular, in other areas of the Tibetan cultural world. He and de Azevedo launched renovation projects in eastern Tibet (part of Qinghai and Sichuan provinces in China), Mongolia, Ladakh and Sikkim, as well as a conservation project involving residents in three traditional areas of the old city of Beijing.

In particular THF assisted local communities in recovery from the earthquake in Yushu (Qinghai) in 2010 and the flash floods in Ladakh (north-western India) that same year. Their work was recognised by a United Nations Best Practice Award, three UNESCO Heritage Awards, and the Global Vision Award.

Alexander became an architectural authority, defying those who emphasise the preservation of religious architecture while ignoring lay heritage. His publications include *The Temples of Lhasa* (Serindia, 2005) and *A Manual of Traditional Mongolian Architecture* (THF, 2005); the *Beijing Hutong Conservation Study* (THF, 2004); *The Old City of Lhasa* (THF; 2-vols., 1998, 1999); as well as countless field reports and articles. In 2011 Alexander was featured in the BBC television series 'Heritage Heroes'. André Alexander, who had been in good health, died in Berlin after suffering a suspected heart attack in 2012, age 47.

