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SITE MODEL

Sustaining A Culture

A Design Dissertation for a Tibetan Art and Crafts Centre, McLeodganj, Himachal Pradesh.

Text: Mahesh Pillai
Visual: Courtesy Mahesh Naik



SOUTH-EAST ELEVATION

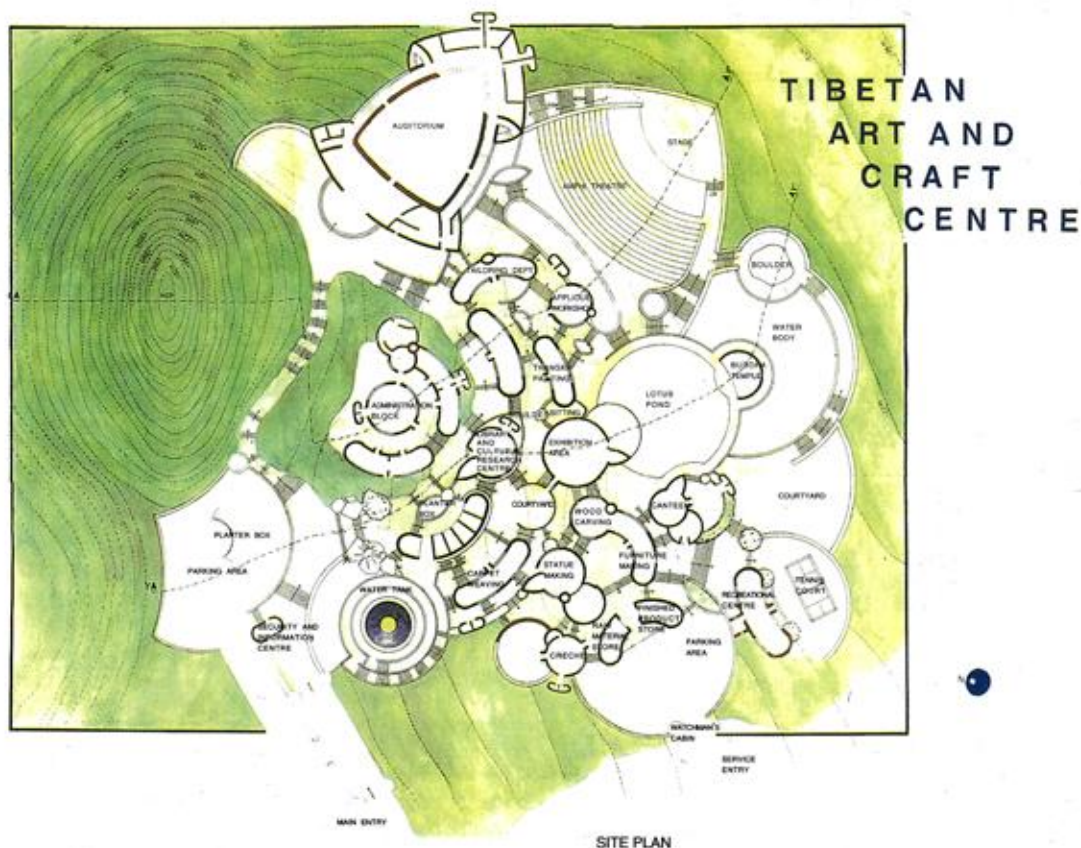
Showing a culture can provide a window to its richness, more so for people who might otherwise not have sufficient opportunity to experience it. Such an arts and crafts centre is particularly important in the case of Tibet, to maintain the distinct identity of its people and culture, which is under continued threat of extermination. Mahesh Naik, an alumnus of Pillais' College of Architecture, Navi Mumbai, in his Final Year Design Dissertation, identifies the various issues that the Tibetans are facing to earn their freedom and livelihood. And in response, proposes an art and craft centre to facilitate an identity and a means of sustenance.

The aim was to create an awareness towards the richness of Tibetan art and crafts among both the Tibetans and foreign patrons with the long-term goal of preserving Tibetan culture. A centre that would propagate education in the traditional arts and crafts along with its production and distribution was envisaged to sustain reality in the design.

History and Background

Tibet, with its roots deep in the tenets of Buddhism, has developed a culture that is vibrant and rich in both variety and form. The Chinese invasion in 1949 was the most devastating event in Tibetan history that led to huge loss of life (1.2 million) and property (over 6 thousand monasteries were destroyed). The people of Tibet, despite embracing severe restrictions and oppressive measures, were exiled from their beloved country along with their spiritual head, the Dalai Lama. With extensive support from the Indian Government, they settled at Dharamsala, Himachal Pradesh. Such a fragile situation implied that it was up to the Tibetans in exile to preserve their culture and dignity outside their homeland.

And they have succeeded. Despite political torment, the ancient arts and crafts of Tibet live on. Their artistic skills have grown and strengthened with the master-disciple tradition. Of the various arts practised, the most popular are Thangka painting,



SITE PLAN

statue making, appliqué needlework, woodcarving and carpentry, tailoring, carpet and rug weaving, metal work, and Lhamo (Tibetan Opera). A variety of these are displayed at the Festival of Tibet held in all major cities in India.

Site and Design Brief

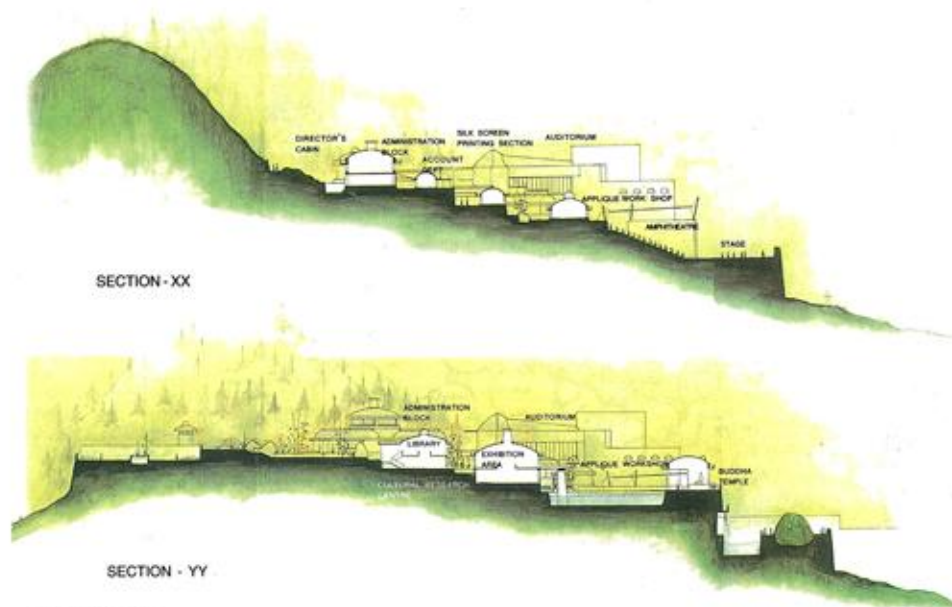
The hypothetical site is located at McLeodganj, Himachal Pradesh (1200m above sea level) near the central Tibetan Administration in exile. Situated near the Bhagsu-Nag waterfall and surrounded by the Dhauladhar mountain range on three sides, the site spreads over three acres down the slope of the valley to the south. The town has very little noise and air pollution and is easily accessible by road and air. Hot summers and cool winters govern the climate with scanty rainfall throughout the year. The site is subjected to fog cover during the winter months. It is facilitated by the south and southwest winds in summer and north and northwest winds in

winter. Certain sectors of the site are suitable for vegetation. The local stones available are sandstone, shale, quartzite and slate while timber ranges between red wood, hemlock, spruce and cedar.

The proposed Tibetan Art and Craft Centre aims to promote the traditional art and literary studies of Tibet. It comprises workshops for art and crafts, a literary and cultural research centre, an exhibition area and an auditorium. Landmarks like a Buddha temple, an auditorium and an open-air amphitheatre will allow a greater public participation. Facilitating the primary spaces are the cafeteria, shops and the recreational centre for the staff and workers.

Design

A polygonal plot stepping down the valley has its entrance in the northwest from one of the highest contours of the Dhauladhar Mountain. Cascading down the hill is a conglomeration of circular



SITE SECTIONS

and sausage-shaped structures consciously built to shield from the cold harsh winds. The water tank is located on one of the highest contours within the premise for gravitational reasons. Most of the site is barricaded from the northwest winds by the apex of the Dhauladhar. As one studies the design, a de-linearised geometry and segregated planning is observed. This is an answer to the climatic extremities of the region and moreover to separate the various departments of the centre.

From the main street are chartered two pathways; one leads to the parking while the other to the security and information centre, with the latter being pedestrian. Vehicular entry into the site is restricted, thereby reducing the noise and the air-pollution levels. A shopping block near the entrance houses a store for each of the various crafts practised here. It is so located for customer-convenience. Behind this lies the nucleic courtyard from where various faculties radiate. Engulfing this communal space is the library and research block, the exhibition area, woodcarving department, carpet-weaving department and the statue-making department. The curved pathway meandering from the entrance to the amphitheatre separates the administration from the active parts of the centre. Stationed at a higher level, the administration block supervises over the other structures. It is a building that

stretches along the horizontal axis, yet maintains a stoic relationship with the surroundings. The chamfered-conical and hemispherical skylights in the roof brighten the interiors.

The woodcarving and statue-making departments are arranged near the service entrance to facilitate easy transportation of the heavy raw materials they demand. A crèche - a supportive feature for the working parents - is provided near the raw material store. The library and the cultural research centre share the lower and the upper floors respectively of the same building. The departments of thangka painting, silk screen printing, tailoring and the appliqué workshop require lighter raw materials and hence are placed together at a comparatively distant area. The auditorium at the far end of the site in the northeast owns a separate access secluding itself from the heavy public traffic in the workshop areas. The coniferous plantation around the amphitheatre acts as a windbreaker against the cold north and northwest winds and also as an acoustical barrier.

The exhibition area, with its central location attracts visitors from the various zones in the site. This building offers a meditative view of the Buddha temple, amidst the Lotus pond and the water body that harmonise with the carved levels of the valley. These ponds, located in the southeast of the site, remain cool

during the summer. The structures are pre-dominantly load bearing and have massive stone retaining walls that act as a buffer between the interior and exterior. The main structure is defined by walls rising in yellow sandstone mounted by an RCC slab clad with slate. They are characterised to receive maximum light from the south and southeast. The low ceiling helps to heat up the space quickly, while the double-glazing proposed reduces heat penetration (almost 40%). An RCC roof gutter is provided to channelise the rainwater and the melting snow. It is ornamented with Tibetan motifs. The materials proposed for construction are locally available. The flooring within most structures is patterned with hemlock. The doors and windows are built in cedar, while the interior furniture is in redwood. The site geography is utilised optimally to determine the services layout.

Aesthetics

Holistically, the design adds a warm character to the whole locality. A visually appealing elevation in similar colours as the ground appears as if springing from the earth. The approach to the structures is humane, contrary to the towering surroundings. The bold RCC gutter band at the roof level and the broad plinth band capture one's vision within the body of the structure. The inverted arched windows lighten the heavy massing of the buildings. A culmination of organic forms and elements, the design exhibits an earthy rich attitude identifying with the Tibetan ideals.

Conclusion

The layout of the centre carefully abides to the original topography of the site. The curved and circular forms proposed for the structures withstand wind pressure that prevails over the valley. Close compact planning yet adequately spaced provides shelter against the winds and also gains benefit from solar radiation. The orientation of the structures is derived from various factors such as local topography, wind and solar radiation, sound pollution, requirement of privacy and aesthetics.

The design acutely measures the site character, the climatic behaviour and most important: the characteristic users. This proposal not only aims at an academic milestone but also expresses support and provides hope to the Tibetan community. A platform to display and preserve Tibetan culture is essential in context with Tibet's past.



Coniferous trees are used to capture the fog before it reaches the building.



The structures are located and oriented to enjoy a climatically comfortable environment throughout the year.



The water bodies remain cool in summer, allowing a moderation in the microclimate.



A landscape solution to protect the structures against the cold North-West winds.