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The Architecture of the Medical College on Chakpori, Lhasa

by Knud Larsen

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(click on the small image for full screen image with captions.)

1



Fig. 1

Lhasa is located on a vast, flat plain surrounded by mountains up to one thousand metres higher. The river Kyichu enters the plain from east and follows the southern foothills to disappear towards the west and after a sharp bend join the Yarlung Tsangpo River/ Brahmaputra some forty kilometres further south (fig.1).

Almost in the middle of the plain and not far from the river there is a small ensemble of hills that seem to have been important when it was decided to build the town here in the seventh century: The Marpori Hill, which became the site of the Potala Palace, the Chakpori Hill and the much lower Bhamari Hill. Marpori and Chakpori both rises 100 metres over the plain, while Bhamari only reaches 18 metres. Marpori and Chakpori are one kilometre apart and thus close neighbours in the vast landscape (figs. 2, 3). Both hills have caves that were used for meditation by Songtsen Gampo in the seventh century and the Potala Palace was built

over a cave on the top (figs. 4, 5). It is general knowledge that the great master Thangtong Gyalpo (1361-1485) established a temple on top of Chakpori dominated by a round tower[1]. Sangye Gyatso (1653-1705), the regent after the fifth Dalai Lama, extended the temple in 1696 and set up the first medical college there. This college existed until 1959 when it was destroyed during the uprising as the Dalai Lama escaped to India. Tibetan fighters used the college as a stronghold from where to shot at the Chinese army. The building housing the college was reduced to a ruin, which in the early eighties was removed to make way for a huge TV antenna still standing today.



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

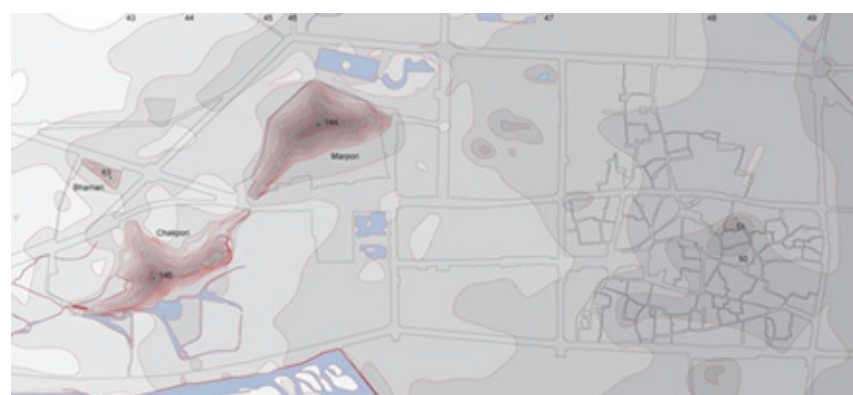


Fig. 4



Fig. 5

The Marpori hill with Potala Palace is the most prominent landmark in the Lhasa valley visible from everywhere in the town and landscape. Wherever you are you will find direction by looking up Potala. In our book "The Lhasa Atlas"[2] we made a point of showing how important the view of Potala is in experiencing the old town. Chakpori with the Medical College played a similar role, something which has been emphasized through the lay out of new roads pointing directly at the top of the hill: Yutok Lam connecting the entrance to the Jokhang Temple (fig. 6) with Chakpori through a visual axis (fig. 7) and the Norbulinka Road with Chakpori as the point of view from the entrance to the Norbulinka Park (fig. 8). Marpori and Chakpori also together create the natural "gateway" to Old Lhasa. There has thus been an important visual interplay between Potala and The Medical College (fig. 9). By looking at the two buildings and evaluating the visual distance between them you would be able to pinpoint quite exactly your position in the environment. The visual is one aspect - the other is the symbolic meaning of the connection between the two religious institutions. Chakpori was both a school of medicine and a temple. Monks were educated to become doctors and to carry out research on medicinal plants and other remedies. It was the place to go when you needed medical treatment. Only much later was a hospital for traditional medicine, Mentsikhang, established in the Old Town itself. The importance of the Medical College to the inhabitants of Lhasa was thus great, both in a visual, religious and practical way.



Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig. 9

The destruction of the college in 1959 was therefore a great loss, which was intensified through the ruin being constantly in view for many years before the huge steel TV-mast replaced it and added to the pain. Furthermore the upper half of the hill was fenced off and in the late nineties the entire hill was declared inaccessible to the public. When I first visited Chakpori in 1987 one could climb halfway up the hill to a water tank from where there was a fine view of Potala and the Old Town. Above was the ridge leading up towards the top where formerly a row of houses for the staff of the Medical College was located and below was a few remaining half ruined houses close to the West gate, for the same purpose.

2

While working on "The Lhasa Atlas" (1995-2000) we often heard desires to get rid of the disturbing TV-mast, and the question of how this could be done was therefore constantly on our mind. In the middle nineties I had arranged a two week trip to Norway and Denmark for the then head of the Lhasa Town Planning Department and the foremost architect of Tibet Minyag Chokyi Gyaltsen Rinpoche as part of our research on Old Lhasa. The aim was to show the local Tibetan authorities and professionals how we looked at and practised conservation of architecture and townscape in Scandinavia. The visit was a great success and gave us considerable goodwill in our fieldwork in Lhasa.

In 1994 the Potala Palace was entered into the UNESCO World Heritage List. This created heightened attention on buildings in the surrounding areas, some of which were considered to be encroaching on the palace and therefore should be removed. Such removal happened in the following years to several new buildings both commercial and residential south of Potala as well as to buildings in the park north of Potala and to a huge shopping mall east of Potala, which is now a parking area.



Fig. 10



Fig. 11

In 2004 there was a UNDP-conference in Lhasa, probably as a ten year celebration of the heritage list inscription. As I was accidentally in Lhasa at the same time I was invited to attend some of the activities as an "expert" on Old Lhasa. Through my research and newly published book on Lhasa I got a small consultant job for UNDP, which involved registration of traditional architecture in Lhasa, but the promised long-time consultant job never materialized. However during the conference I toured the town with the then head of the planning department of Lhasa and another local delegate. When passing in front of Potala and driving further west along Beijing Middle Road we came to the TV-house on the corner of Lingkor West Road. This building has a special sloping design in order to not obstruct the view of Potala (fig. 10). Nevertheless the planning director declared that the building would be demolished to make way for an extension of the park surrounding Potala and that a new TV-house would be built at a different location in Lhasa. I immediately saw the great opportunity in this transition, and asked him to just turn his head and look up at the antenna on Chakpori (fig. 11), and I therefore said: "But if you remove the TV-building from here you will of course have to move the TV-antenna as well and then you can rebuild the Medical

College up there. Wouldn't that be a fantastic thing to accomplish for Lhasa and its inhabitants?" "I agree" he said "We would like that, but the problem is that we don't know how the college looked and we have no architectural drawings of it". "That is the smallest problem" I said "There are good photos of the building in western archives and I will make architectural drawings from these photos - good enough to build from". We agreed that I should do this and drove on.

I then talked to Minyag Chokyi Gyaltsen Rinpoche, reincarnated lama and head of three monasteries in Minyag, Kham, who because of the so-called Chinese "cultural revolution" was forced to leave his monasteries and work in a remote Tibetan village as a farmer. There he gradually learned the craft of building and trained himself to become an architect. Now he is an architect and professor in traditional architecture in Lhasa and when I met him in 1994 he had become the professional who took care of all major architectural projects of conservation in Tibet. He has among many other buildings worked on Potala Palace, put the new roof on Samye Monastery and restored Sakya Monastery. He was delighted with the view to rebuild the Medical College and agreed to join in the project by collecting information from a couple of local, still living doctors who had worked on Chakpori.

3

Several western photographers took photographs of the Medical College before 1959.

- among them are: Hugh Richardson, Frederick Spencer Chapman, Heinrich Harrer, C. S. Cutting, Josef Vanis, Charles Bell, Rabden Lepcha, Evan Nepan and John Claude White.

On leafing through their photos accessible on the Net I found that only one by Josef Vanis (fig. 12) had sufficient detail to serve as starting-point for an attempt to recreate the design of the building. It is a serious drawback that all the best photos are seen from the same viewpoint - from Potala or the direction of Potala, so that a three dimensional understanding is difficult. Harrer has a good photo from the same direction as Vanis but from greater distance and with less detail.

One feature, visible from the street below even today, is the remains of two corners of stone structures (fig. 13). These corners are easily identifiable on Vanis's photo as the corner of a bastion supporting the access ramp and the corner of a small separate building, which apparently is a gatehouse giving access to the entire complex (figs.14, 15) The two corners can today also be identified on Google Earth and they help to establish the direction and extent of the building (fig. 16). On Google Earth the present size of the plateau that supports the TV-mast and a small service building can also be measured to be approximately 23 by 33 metres. In 2009 however Google Earth was less detailed and not useful.

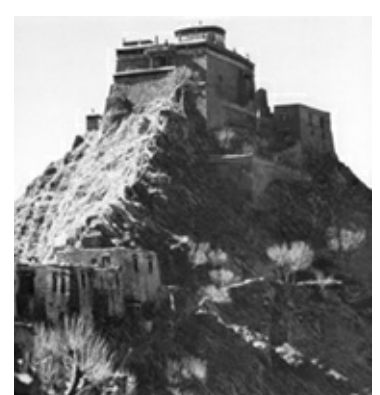


Fig. 12



Fig. 13



Fig. 14



Fig. 15

An important detail on Vanis's photo is the presence of two persons – one standing on the roof and one in front of the main entrance to the temple (fig.17). By using these as a measure stick it is possible to get an idea of the length of the eastern façade with the main entrance. Finding the measure on the adjacent north façade is however more difficult because it is not evident from the photo if the main building is square or rectangular. I supposed the main entrance to be in the middle of the east façade and the round tower to have its centre in the same axis but evidently from the photo not in the centre of the building but closer to the west wall. I assumed that a building on a very steep hill with a narrow top already adorned with a round tower would have to be square and accordingly drew a square plan.



Fig. 16



Fig. 17



Fig. 18

The photo clearly shows the access to the college to be a sequence of ramps and stairs starting on the north side where the footpath ends deep under the main level of the temple. The entrance ramp is built up with a heavy stone wall and takes a sharp turn up towards the small gatehouse, which apparently has two levels. Inside there must be stairs leading up to a narrow open space under the towering north façade of the temple itself. Judging from doors and a window on the north façade there's an entrance to a basement space and to the main hall via a somewhat complicated set of stairs from this narrow space. A long ramp, most possibly stepped, leads around the northeast corner and up a flight of stairs to the entrance to the main hall. The entrance is covered by a canopy on which the person on the photo is standing. This is also the roof seen on Spencer Chapman's well known photo with the two trumpeting monks and Potala in the background (fig.18).

Based on my knowledge of traditional Tibetan construction I drew a plan with a prayer hall with many pillars around a round "sacred" space – the foot of the tower, but with no idea of the location of specific functions. The plan was constructed, so to say, from the outside in, whereas the later plan is designed from the inside out. I also had no idea of what was inside the tower and assumed it to be one large space.

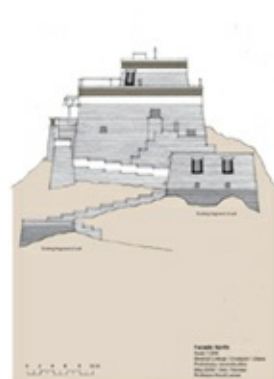


Fig. 19



Fig. 20

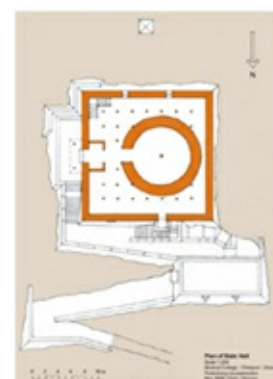


Fig. 21

The result was not very satisfying but it was a start and I hoped to get new information later from Lhasa doctors or perhaps from somebody at the Vancouver IATS seminar, who might know something (figs. 19, 20, 21).

4

The time went by and nothing new happened until I in the summer of 2012 accidentally met Theresia Hofer in Oslo. She was then a postdoc at the University of Oslo having written a thesis on Tibetan medicine and now she was curating an exhibition at Rubin Museum of Art in New York with the title "Bodies in Balance - The Art of Tibetan Medicine". I told her about my attempt to reconstruct the Medical College whereupon she asked me to contribute with my drawings and to be a co-author on a chapter in the book to be published in connection with the exhibition called: "Pillars of Tibetan Medicine – The Chagpori and the Mentsikhang Medical Institutes in Lhasa".

Through Hofer I came to know of a text about the Medical College in the German book 'Der Tschagpori in Lhasa' from 2005, with interviews with three doctors who had worked at the Medical College[3]. This new information was instrumental in a totally new view of the building design.

Also she showed me photos by Heinrich Harrer from 1982 of the remaining ruins, which were removed shortly after his visit and replaced by the TV-mast. Some of these helped solve problems of the interior organization.

Finally searching for photos in the "Bundesarchiv" I came across a series of photos from 1938-39 by Ernst Schäfer, which were unknown to me and which solved a number of questions concerning the upper structure of the college.

The most important information for me in the German book was that the main hall had twenty pillars. Anyone familiar with the Tibetan pillar grid will know that this means a hall with four by five pillars, again meaning a space measuring five by six pillar gaps. Each gap being approximately 2.4 metre, as a general rule in any Tibetan building, one has a space of 12 by 14.4 metres, which fits perfectly to the site.

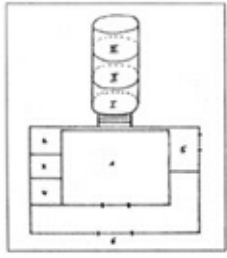


Abbildung 19 Skizze des Hauptgebäudes des Tschagpori, nach Angaben von Amchi Tenzin Palchok im Interview von 1997.
Legende: 1. Tschagpori (Hauptgebäude) 2. Tschagpori (Hauptgebäude) 3. Tschagpori (Hauptgebäude) 4. Tschagpori (Hauptgebäude) 5. Tschagpori (Hauptgebäude) 6. Tschagpori (Hauptgebäude)

Fig. 22

and a slightly darker piece of wall towards the southern end of the façade, which means that this part was added on after the erection of a symmetrical main hall. This again means that an extra row of pillars was added onto the main hall either after the first completion of the building or perhaps more likely during construction as a result of need for extra space realized late in the building process. My mistake was excusable because prayer halls like this are normally always symmetrical and symmetrically placed in the building.

This extra space results in a row of rooms two pillar-gaps wide (approximately 5 metres). This gives good meaning when considering the use of these spaces along the southern wall. The westernmost room is assigned to “Storeroom for medicine thangkas”. The next room to “Storeroom for silk decorations”. The third room has an unknown use. The size of these three rooms is not mentioned on the sketch but it must be a one -, a two- and a three pillar room as shown or three two pillar rooms. On the other side of the main hall along the northern wall is a room assigned to printing. It is a long narrow space about 2.5 metres wide but it is perfect for storage of printing blocks and paper and sufficient for traditional printing. My experience is that the space needed for two men printing from wooden blocks is approximately 1.5 by 2 metres. A side entrance connects the printing space to the outside stairs mentioned before.

The Vanis photo shows a small covered space extending over the roof in the south east corner of the main hall. This most probably indicates where the interior stairs are located. Such location is also known from most other monasteries. These stairs give access to the mezzanine, which is also a common feature of main halls. The mezzanine provides daylight to the prayer hall and gives access to smaller rooms on the first floor, in this case to the first floor in the tower.

It’s not easy to determine if the main stairs also extended up to the roof over the mezzanine, but it is quite possible that they didn’t and that the roof is reached via a flight of light stairs simply placed on the roof of the secondary rooms. Such light outdoor, wooden stairs are common on monastery roofs.

The height of the stories in the tower is assumed to be the same for all three floors, about three metres. It might be more or less. Anyway there seems to have been another small flight of stairs from the roof up to the second floor of the tower. This is also quite common as can be seen for example in Shalu Monastery.

In the photo a central “mast” seems to stand in the centre of the tower. In my first design attempt I suggested that this was indeed a huge mast supporting the roof of the tower. It would be similar to the wooden mast in the core of stupas. But it could also just be part of the roof in form of a decorative gilded top. In the final design, realizing the constructive problems with a central pillar supporting two floors and a roof, I concluded that there must have been an inner core construction in the tower, most probably consisting of four interconnected pillars.



Fig. 23



Fig. 24



Fig. 25

While writing now I found an answer to this question when I came across a “new” photo by Harrer, which shows Peter Aufschneider (1899-1973) standing on the roof of the tower looking at an instrument on a tripod (fig. 23). The curved wall shows that he is on the top of the round tower and it is obvious that the “mast” in fact is a copper decoration in the centre of the roof. When comparing Potala on this photo with Potala on a photo taken from the roof over the mezzanine it is seen that this photo is seen from a higher level and the only higher level is the top of the tower.

Heinrich Harrer came back to Lhasa in 1982 and then took a series of interesting photos of the ruined college. Especially two photos: One from north east, from the most used photo angle (fig. 24) and one from the “backside” towards south west (fig. 25). In the first photo the ramp in the foreground is easily identifiable. A hole in the north façade shows where the small window was. A door from the middle of the stairs on the east façade to the basement is visible as well as the window in the tower looking towards Potala. The second photo shows the windows in the south façade, the closeness of the tower to the west wall and a peculiarity visible by a careful study of an enlargement: A horizontal slit in the west wall just above the rocks. Below the slit the rocks are discoloured apparently from something coming out of the slit and running down the rock face. This is undoubtedly the traces from a toilet. There must of course have been a toilet in the building and given the narrow space on the top of the hill and the location of the entrance (and kitchen) the south west corner would be a natural place. The location also fits very well in the design of the floor plans of the different levels. There has been one toilet in connection with the print shop on the main level and an open one on the roof. They were separated by a wall. Open roof toilets are well known for example in the Jokhang temple in Lhasa and rocks discoloured by toilet waste can be seen of the north side of Potala near the exit.



Fig. 26



Fig. 27

In the basement under the main hall was a storeroom for medical plants. The level of the rocks outside the building, especially on the west façade, suggests that the top of the rock on which the tower was built is almost level with the ground floor level. This means that the basement was built around the hill top and that the basement therefore was partly filled up with the rock. This storage space had two entrances and could possibly also be reached by the main stairs in the south east corner of the prayer hall.

The famous photo by Spencer Chapman with the two monks trumpeting from the roof of the Medical College is from 1937 (fig. 18). The following year Ernst Schäfer took the almost exact replica of this photo as one in a series of shots where the monks were blowing in different directions and from different levels. We cannot know if Schäfer knew about Spencer Chapman’s photo but it seems quite possible that he did. Anyway Schäfer’s photos at a first glance seemingly don’t add any

interesting information to what can be seen on Spencer Chapman’s photo. We see the monks standing on the roof of the prayer hall with the horns resting on the canopy over the main entrance. However on some of Schäfer’s photos the monks are seen standing on a level

higher than the prayer hall roof (figs. 26, 27). This level must be a roof over the mezzanine of the prayer hall and Spencer Chapman must have been standing on this roof. The existence of a roofed-over mezzanine explains how the prayer hall was lit and how the two upper floors in the tower were accessed. Under the feet of Spencer Chapman there must have been a large window sending daylight down into the centre of the prayer hall, a very common arrangement, which can be seen in almost any Tibetan temple.

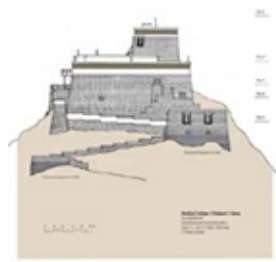


Fig. 28



Fig. 29

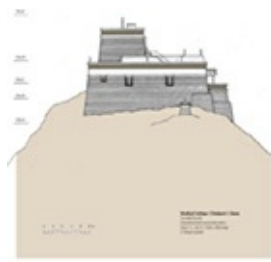


Fig. 30

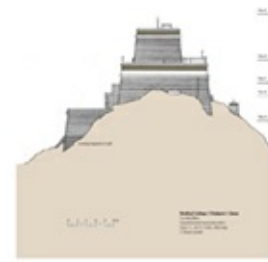


Fig. 31



Fig. 32

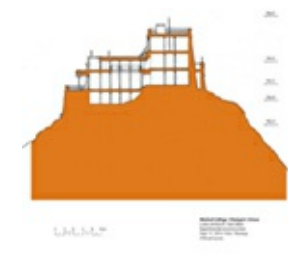


Fig. 33

The German book mentions that the kitchen was located in the small entrance building, a natural place considering the daily incoming provisions. It's easy to imagine that next to the stairs in the basement of the gatehouse there was a storeroom for food while the kitchen was upstairs.



Fig. 34



Fig. 35



Fig. 36



Fig. 37

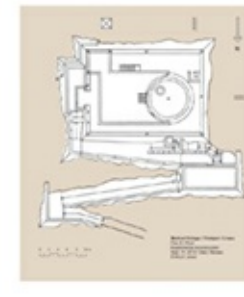


Fig. 38

The sequence of drawings shows the final reconstruction experiment starting with the facades, which are closest to the photos (figs. 28, 29, 30, 31). The sections explain the attachment to the ground and the levels (fig. 32, 33). The plans explain functions and the sizes of the spaces (figs. 34, 35, 36, 37, 38).

5

During my visit to Lhasa in the autumn of 2015 it was rumoured that the transferring of the TV-house to a site near the new university campus east of the town was under way. I could not have it confirmed, but if so, the removal of the TV tower from Chakpori is a realistic possibility. However it remains to be seen what the authorities will do with the hill. It is obvious that the hill's strategic importance has been upgraded during the last twenty-five years and it is a question if the military is ready to release it to public use.

A reconstruction of the Medical College on its original site is as shown possible and a suggestion for its use could be a medical museum showing among other things the wonderful series of medicine thangkas. It could perhaps also be re-established as a research centre for medical herbs. A reconstruction should be carried out with traditional building methods with the use of traditional materials and tools. Visible concrete and modern materials should be banned, the reconstruction of the Shigatse Zong being a horror example.

The reappearance of the building on top of Chakpori with its outstanding visibility would be an enormous encouragement for the Tibetans in Lhasa and it would win international acclaim from the whole world. The college would also attract a great number of tourists especially as in the future the fragile construction of Potala will reduce the number of Potala-visitors Chakpori could become some sort of replacement where visitors would experience some of the same qualities as associated with Potala.

Minyag Chokyi Gyaltzen Rinpoche has taken over my reconstruction design and will carry the project further on the local level. I have no doubt that he is the right man to make this project a reality.

6

As an epilogue I will recount an almost incredible coincidence. On my way to Lhasa in September 2015, to among other things present my new drawings of the Chakpori Medical College to Minyag Rinpoche, I stopped a few days in Chengdu. A friend invited me for lunch in a fine restaurant where she also had invited some of her Chinese friends. She didn't know anything about my work on the Medical College. The other guests were an elderly man, his daughter and his son in law. After the meal we talked and during the conversation the old man asked me about my occupation. After telling him about my work as professor in architecture and my work in Tibet, it occurred to me that I could show him my Chakpori drawings, which I had on my laptop. I must here add that I had no idea of his history or what he was doing. I told him about my Chakpori project and showed him the photos and drawings. He looked at the pictures calmly and then looked at me and said quietly that he probably knew that building better than most others.

He then told the following story: As a seventeen year old soldier he took part in the invasion of Tibet in 1950. In 1959 he was commanding officer for a troop of soldiers. During the uprising, where Dalai Lama fled to India, he was ordered to quell the resistance from Chakpori Medical College where rioters had retreated shooting at the Chinese PLA-forces. During night he and another sneaked into the grounds in Tibetan disguise to spy. The following day he led the bombardment and destruction of the college. He also led the bombardment of Potala.

In Tibet he studied medicine and became a much loved doctor in Shigatse where he also became the life-doctor of Panchen Lama. He and his family loved Tibet and the Tibetans and wanted to stay, but after 20 years he was in 1970 ordered to return to China.

He returned to his hometown Chengdu where he has practised as a doctor until his recent retirement. Afterwards in his home his wife showed me photos of their happy life in Lhasa and Shigatse.

He wished me good luck with the project, and I think this meeting was a very strange, auspicious omen: The circle of destruction and reconstruction is about to close.



Sketch by Tsewang Tashi

Knud Larsen is Professor Emeritus in Architectural Design at NTNU, The Norwegian University of Science and Technology. He has travelled in Tibet since 1987 and carried out (1995-2000) a research project in Lhasa on traditional architecture together with Architect Amund Sinding-Larsen. They published in 2001 the book “The Lhasa Atlas. Traditional Tibetan Architecture and Townscape”, which was also published in a Chinese/Tibetan edition in 2005. During the first 2000 decade he guided a yearly, advanced course in “Architectural Design in a Historic Environment” in Lhasa for European students on the Erasmus Exchange Program. He has since 1995 collaborated with Tibetan architects and artists on a number of projects. He is the editor of a book to come with the working title “Wall Paintings in Tibet. History-Meaning-Technique”, and he carried out new architectural surveys in nineteen monasteries and caves in Central – and Western Tibet as part of this book-project.

Footnotes

1. See also: Theresia Hofer et al, *Bodies in Balance - The Art of Tibetan Medicine* (Seattle and London: Rubin Museum of Art, New York in association with University of Washington Press, 2014), *Pillars of Tibetan Medicine – The Chagpori and the Mentsikhang Medical Institutes in Lhasa* by Theresia Hofer and Knud Larsen.
2. Knud Larsen and Amund Sinding-Larsen, *The Lhasa Atlas. Traditional Tibetan Architecture and Townscape* (London : Serindia Publications, 2001).
3. Robert Gerl and Jürgen Aschoff, *Der Tschagpori in Lhasa. Medizinhochschule und Kloster* (Ulm/Donau: Fabri Verlag, 2005).

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