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Mapping Amdo III. Dynamics of Relations and
Interaction, followed by Varia

Harrison John, *Mustang Building. Tibetan Temples and Vernacular Architecture in Nepal Himalaya*

Kathmandu, Vajra Books, 2019, 396 pages, photos and architectural drawings in black and white, ISBN 978-9937-0-6942-7

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Seeing Mustang buildings through the eyes and drawings of an architect

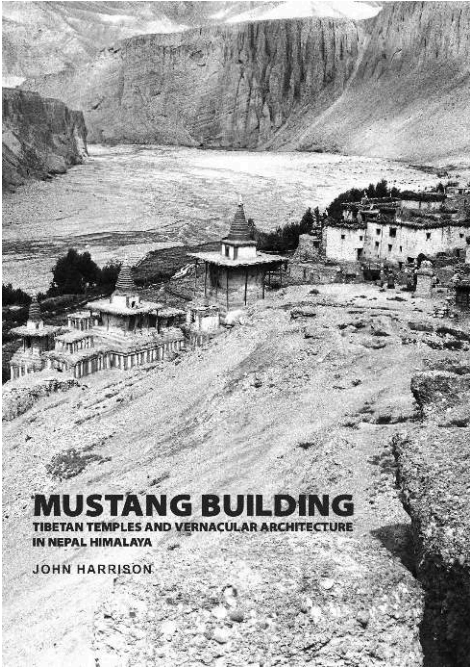
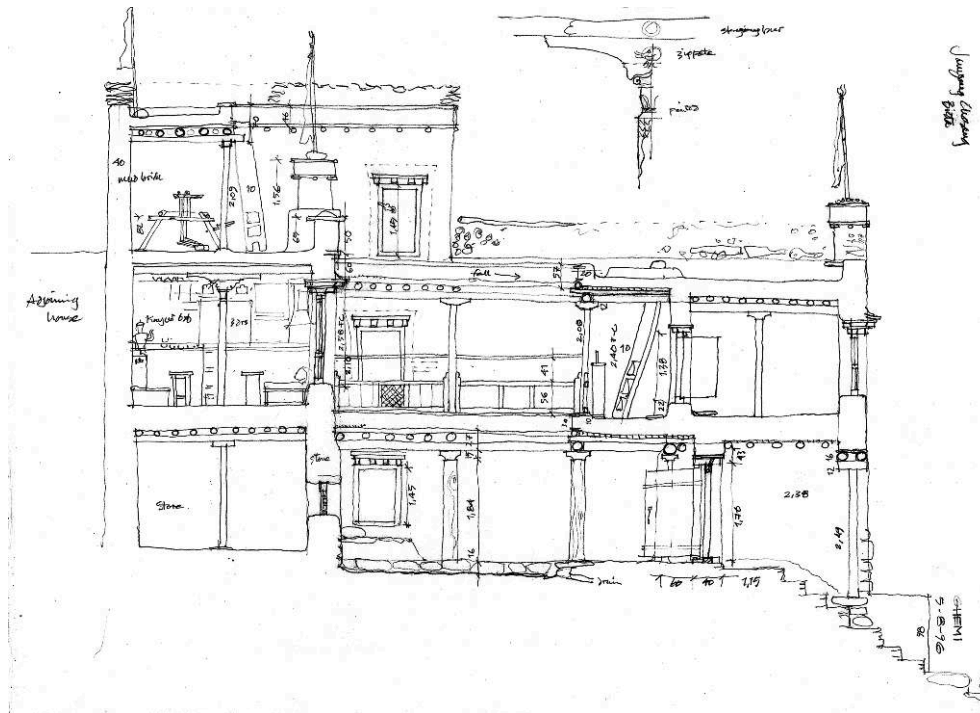
- 1 John Harrison's *Mustang Building* comes with a programmatic cover image: an old path leading towards an accumulation of Himalayan houses along a row of stupas, some of them of the passageway type. A group of villagers are almost completely absorbed into the background. The photograph is taken from a higher position, and the picture completely excludes the sky while it captures a broad riverbed in the valley, the cliffs, and a barren landscape. The photograph is in greyscale that avoids spotlight on any of the components of the image. All components melt into one another – and this is what the book is about: the complexity of the whole, the interplay of the various building types, the integration of different functions expressed through architectural forms and manifest in spatial configuration. The title of the book, in black letters with its subtitle *Tibetan Temples and Vernacular Architecture in Nepal Himalaya*, and the author's name below appear like a caption – a confirmation of what is already clear from the image. The choice of this specific setting for a cover page reflects more than the topic as such. The well-designed row of stupas which guide the traveller along the trail towards the village houses resonates with travel and arrival. And this is another major facet of this book. It is the story of the journey of an architect, the story of an actual physical travel but also a travel through time. Harrison introduces the architecture of Mustang through a sort of architectural travelogue, the result of roughly 30 years of experience, a slow approach – via overland routes from the UK to Nepal at the very beginning – which soon became a life mission.
 
- 2 The central pillar of the book and the storytelling is Harrison's intense use of hand drawings. The hand-drawn survey sketch of Gonpa Gang, Tshug, on the second page of the "Foreword" not only introduces the methodology. It invites the reader to experience the architecture of Mustang through the fundamental representation of architectural thought and understanding, that is, drawing – in this case the notes from the architect's sketch book which grasps the various moments of first encounters with a new architectural language. Harrison's sketches archive a process of learning. Sketching an object or space – or rather things that define a specific space – is more than an aesthetic exercise. It is a reflection of an analytic process with its immanent logic. This has been perfectly summarised by Barbara Wittmann (2008, p. 69) who also states that drawing forces the draughtsman or draughtswoman to look into details. While in the drawing, details come to the foreground, the whole or overall setting still remains in the picture. Wittmann further states that drawing is a slow process that enhances a gradual, deeper understanding of the subject under survey – thus, the experience gained through drawing has a major impact on generating new knowledge (*ibid.*, pp. 70-71).

Figure 1. Survey sketch section, 1996



© Harrison 2019, p. 195, fig. 6.68

- 3 Now printed in a well-designed book, Harrison's sketches and drawings invite the reader to follow the author in that process. Sketches and drawings constitute the first language of the architect to communicate the essence of an architectural context. And like with any other language it requires practice and time to extract all the qualities and data embedded in the lines and annotations. In this regard, three double pages stand out, namely, 194-195, 286-287, and 314-315 discussing the Jamyang Chosang Bista House at Gemi, the Ghasa Village Gate, and Kag Gönpa. On these double pages, the survey drawings of the respective buildings face the final plans. The direct comparison not only reveals the consistency regarding aesthetic quality but also testifies to the accuracy of the sketch. The sketch becomes the major source from which the analysis sets out. In the specific case, it is the result of decades of practice in the field and a perfect interplay between hand, eye and mind.
- 4 While Harrison avoids using any vectorised CAAD plans, his publication includes the works of others who adhere to hand drawings. The slightly different styles – just like different handwritings – of the various draughtsmen and architects who contributed to this volume can easily be grasped. Their drawings are valuable documents as some of them were produced by scholars of previous generations while others show buildings prior to significant repairs or even collapse before Harrison got a chance to visit them. And many of these drawings are also works of art which are sometimes neglected or unrecognised. Their individual styles add to the overall visual and academic quality. While the beginning of the book provides a detailed overview of previous Western travellers and scholars and their contributions to the research on Mustang, the respective Acknowledgements section for the drawings is only at the end of the volume. Therefore, this review provides the opportunity to point out that starting with

the first page, this book may also be read as an appreciation of a tradition that combines artistic skills and analytic thought. And as any tradition it requires several individuals who establish and uphold it – in this case several of them from Nepal.

- 5 For practical and aesthetic reasons explained in the “Introduction”, the publication exclusively employs greyscale photographs. This secures aesthetic consistency within the photographic part but, first of all, avoids a visual clash with the line drawings. To quote the author from page 11 of the “Foreword”, “I think it better reveals the stark character of the landscape and buildings of Mustang, allowing the eye to concentrate on form”. Harrison is absolutely right as his photographs not only capture the technical and structural aspects of the various buildings and settlements, but also the atmosphere of specific spaces – in particular light as the major creator of the character of a certain place at a certain moment in time. The small Mahakala Temple and Rani Gönpa, Tukche, photographed in the morning dew, may be mentioned here. In contrast, images like the one showing the village of Dzar in front of the mountains to its west completely lack the atmosphere of diffuse light and shadow but create a deep sense of what it means to settle in the arid high-altitude valleys and the impact of nature as the major factor to struggle with. Even images which seem to have a strong focus on the technical aspects of architecture, such as the depiction of the Dukhang of Gönpa Gang on page 324, provide more than just information about the structural and spatial parameters. While the architectural details of the temple’s wooden construction, the brackets, the ceilings, and also the spatial setting are well captured in the photograph, there is something more – something even unusual in it. The notion of an uncanny valley finds its explanation on the following page. It is the absence of religious activities which are usually so firmly tied with the picture of a Buddhist temple. As the author notes, this temple was abandoned by the community of nuns decades ago and only one single caretaker has stayed. The absence of an actual religious occupation based on daily ritual while the temple has been so well maintained becomes only too visible in the image. The essence of a place, either architectural or not, is beyond the technical and built structure – and this is what Harrison’s images convey – or quoting Christian Norberg-Schulz’s *Genius Loci* (1996, p. 8): “A place is [...] a qualitative, ‘total’ phenomenon, which we cannot reduce to any of its properties, such as spatial relationship, without losing its concrete nature out of sight”.
- 6 With a few exceptions all the photographs in the book are by the author. And all of them – even those with an obvious focus on technical and architectural aspects – come with this additional layer of storytelling. Just as on the cover page, Harrison never staged his photographs but captures the daily life of the people in a natural way, literally *in passim* e.g. the stupas of Tangye with a woman passing by (p. 284).

Figure 2. Dzar from the east, 1996



© Harrison 2019, p. 78, fig. 4.49

Figure 3. Tangye chörten



© Harrison 2019, p. 284, fig. 7.80

- 7 The fact that Himalayan architecture cannot be explained and understood through purely technical studies is also obvious from “Chapter Five”. While Harrison discusses the various materials and methods applied in the building process in great detail, he does not miss out to point out the significance of pacifying the gods and spirits that are considered the true owners of the land. The rites are briefly described (page 128) before the author, himself an experienced restoration architect, directs the focus of discussion towards the building materials and components. The methods of construction of foundation walls, rammed-earth walls, mud-brick walls and wooden structures are well documented and – again – well illustrated by photographs and drawings. When it comes to wooden constructions such as doors and window frames, axonometric (isometric) drawings are used to explain the forms and methods of assembling the components. John Harrison starts with basic aspects and slowly proceeds to more complex forms. And with the greater complexity the reader also climbs the ladder of social hierarchy expressed in architecture; that is, towards religious and aristocratic architecture where not only structural sophistication but also symbolism expressed through decoration come to the foreground.
- 8 A similar gradual ascendance is also reflected in the overall structure of the book. At the very beginning, Harrison clarifies the meaning of Mustang as the name of a system of valleys cut by the Kali Gandaki River and its tributaries with its headwater beyond the Himalayan Range on the Tibetan Plateau. Following the introductory chapters on history and geography, the author opens the actual architectural discussion with “Chapter Four” on settlements. The approach is both through history as well as through form and structure. It sets out with a brief mention of cave dwellings which are roughly 2000-3000 years old and continues with the dense, fortified village structures of Te and Tshug. It continues with more open and outspread settlements and only towards the end reaches Lo Manthang (page 106), the modern (?) capital of Upper Mustang and former royal capital built on a square urban layout in the middle of the 15th century. While the placement of Lo Manthang as this point clearly defines a highpoint, it is clear that the focus of the book is on the vernacular aspects.
- 9 The central chapter in the book is thus “Houses”. It introduces a number of houses as case studies to explain the metabolism of the house. One house, however, is selected to explain the complexity of that metabolism in its entirety – in the words of the author, “to examine one house in detail to illustrate the interrelation between the physical form of the building and its social and religious use”. This sub chapter explains the various functions of the house of the family of Angyal Gurung at Dzar from store room to kitchen and living area, and how this system is adapted to changing conditions through the seasons. It explains the interrelation of the house as a social system with the gods and spirits inside the house (house altar) and outside (*rigsum gönpo*/stupas of the three protectors on the roof and protective symbols on or above the door). This chapter summarises and contextualises all the aspects that constitute a house as the place where humans live – physically and metaphysically.
- 10 Finally, “Sacred Buildings” is the longest chapter of the book. It discusses all the various forms of religious structures from single installations such as relief sculptures of protectors flanking the gates of villages to stupas and cave shrines and further on to monasteries and temples. Its highpoint and end at the same time is a study of the temples of Lo Manthang and their history. The “Afterword” then is a return to the present, a brief retrospect on the whole book and a summary of the changes that have

occurred over the last 30 years; that is, since the opening of the region for tourism. Since then, a couple of academic reports have been published about Mustang primarily focusing on its Buddhist culture and its temples. What makes Harrison's work stand out is the broad perspective on the subject, the big picture that is based on the vernacular architecture rooted in and developed in correspondence with the landscape and climate, and, above all, the long stretch of time he covers with his documentation. *Mustang Building* is a modest title for this book which is, of course, at the same time a documentation of changes and a documentation of loss. Like any other book that deals with vernacular architecture and traditional systems, it is full of references to buildings and technologies which might be gone or even forgotten soon. *Mustang Building* is a book about a fading tradition. It is thus an invaluable contribution to our attempts to preserve at least our knowledge of an architectural tradition where physical preservation is no longer possible. It is above all a remarkable book about Mustang architecture drawn and written by a dedicated architect.

Figure 4. Tsarang monastery and chörten, sketch



© Harrison 2019, p. 289, fig. 7.86

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