

Alexandra Skedzuhn-Safir, Martina Oeter, Hilde Vets, Heike Pfund (eds.)

Against Forgetting

Investigating and Preserving Historic Buildings in a Himalayan Village



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4 Empowering Youth Towards Community-Centred Conservation

Ernesto Noriega

The remote Western Himalayan region of Ladakh, on the Tibetan plateau, is one of the highest populated areas in the world, with permanent human settlements at an average altitude of more than 3,000 metres above sea level. Over centuries, notwithstanding the harsh terrain and extreme climatic conditions of the high-altitude desert environment, its inhabitants have developed a vibrant and sophisticated culture. Through careful resource and water management and efficient land use practices, they have succeeded in carving out viable productive areas that have sustained a prolific and elaborate way of life. Far beyond a mere culture of survival, the Ladakhi people have forged outstanding intellectual, spiritual, and artistic traditions that embody this singular context and experience. Today, these traditions are alive in their oral history, dance, and music, and they are most concretely manifested in their vernacular and religious architecture (fig. 1).

Throughout much of its recent history, Ladakh remained largely unaffected by events occurring beyond its geographical confines, virtually staying on the sidelines of most developments brought about by the region's colonial experience and the swift modernisation that followed India's independence. This relative isolation, which lasted until the late 1970s, has enabled its rich culture and local traditions to remain robust, revealing at the same

time the traditional Ladakhi village culture's capacity for self-reliance.

The region's remoteness and prolonged confinement has also allowed the vast majority of its historical buildings, some of them dating back to the 11th century, to escape the destruction that befell the great majority of monasteries and temples throughout the rest of the Buddhist world north of the Himalayas. Consequently, they remain today as precious examples of a unique building tradition. Moreover, in Ladakh we can find some of these ancient monuments still embedded in largely intact rural villages and surrounded by unspoiled and meaning-laden cultural landscapes—vast territories crisscrossed by a network of ceremonial pathways connecting significant sites and places of worship, studded by *chortens*, *mani* walls, and other architectural objects of considerable art-historical value (fig. 2).

Some 40 years ago, however, modernity crossed the Himalayas and has ever since transformed the region at an accelerating pace. Like most Indigenous societies worldwide, Ladakhi communities have come under immense pressure as they see all aspects of their traditional way of life suddenly upended by abrupt and radical change. Today, even secluded rural communities, such as Wanla, are finding it difficult to maintain social cohesion and secure the continuity of their unique culture.



1 In spite of a harsh terrain and extreme climate conditions, the people of Ladakh have managed to carve out sustainable living spaces where a sophisticated culture has flourished (Ernesto Noriega, 2011).



2 The cultural landscape of Ladakh is studded with countless architectural objects that mark places of worship and sites of cultural significance (Ernesto Noriega, 2009).

Increasingly, young Ladakhis leave their villages, drawn to the bigger towns in search of education, employment, and the amenities of modern life. At the same time, village elders are losing their authority as their expertise and skills are perceived as obsolete and irrelevant to today's needs. In this way, the transmission of cultural information is interrupted, beneficial knowledge is lost, fundamental values are weakened, and historical memory begins to fade.

In this context of rapid cultural erosion, the fragility of Ladakh's architectural and artistic heritage has likewise become manifest. Traditional building practices are being abandoned and the use of new materials and architectural forms are widespread. The time-tested and environmentally suitable earthen architecture is being replaced by cement structures with tin roofs, radically transforming village townscapes.

More dramatically, the historical monuments have become visibly affected, sometimes irreversibly. With the loss of the local traditional building know-how, monasteries must increasingly rely on contractors and construction workers from other regions who are unfamiliar with local materials and building techniques, which results in a propensity to replace damaged architectural elements instead of repairing or restoring them. Often, building interventions are not only of a restorative nature but become unavoidable as new needs arise. The growing national and international interest for these cultural treasures has turned some of them into tourist hotspots, putting additional pressure on monasteries, which have in some cases responded by altering the original spaces or adding new structures to their monumental complexes in order to accommodate the influx of visitors.

Moreover, the natural wear and tear caused by time and the continuous use of the ancient buildings is now compounded by a marked acceleration in climate change, which is giving rise to unusually high levels of precipitation in the region, at times even triggering torrential rains and cloudbursts that threaten the integrity of the buildings through extreme material erosion, flooding, and landslides.

Justification

As we can observe in such a time of rapid transformation, the direct and indirect factors that influence the long-term preservation of Ladakh's cultural heritage are growing in number and complexity. Uncoordinated development, a surge in tourist activity, economic migration, the loss of traditional knowledge, a growing disconnect between generations, shifts in social priorities, and a changing climate all represent emerging challenges that need to be taken into account in the interest of protecting the region's endangered historical monuments and cultural landscapes. Members of the Achi Association, drawing on their extensive field experience in the area, understand that if their conservation efforts are to be successful in a sustainable way, their work cannot be strictly limited to the material preservation of the architectural and artistic objects. They also need to consider the larger, dynamic context in which these objects exist.

After all, the durability of this heritage can only be sustained through the broad and active involvement of the communities that harbor it and to whom it belongs—they are the ones that need to protect it, maintain it, monitor it, and actively care for it. For this to happen, and for them to be able to take full ownership of the preservation ideal, the protection of these monuments has to become an endeavour that makes sense to them and speaks to their present life situation. Therefore, conservation initiatives need to be integrated into the wider issues currently confronting these communities—they must reflect their interests, become part of their future development strategies, and ideally contribute to restoring social cohesion and bolstering a renewed sense of a shared identity.

Based on this recognition, the Achi Association launched a three-year pilot initiative in 2009, marking the start of a comprehensive long-term process designed to put the local population front and center of the heritage conservation endeavour. Its goal was to provide young Ladakhis with a space to reflect on the significance and consequences of losing their artistic and architectural heritage as well as the challenge of its preservation during

the profound social and cultural transformation taking place in their communities. Moreover, it would offer them the opportunities to acquire the knowledge, skills, and experience necessary to start taking the protection, maintenance, and management of this heritage into their own hands (fig. 3).

The initiative, called *Pilot Youth Training Program for the Preservation of the Cultural Heritage of Ladakh*, was conceived and implemented in collaboration with the Drikung Kagyu monastic order, a long-term partner of the Achi Association, and it was made possible by a grant

from the Getty Foundation. The initiative's activities were centred on two main locations: the winter sessions were carried out at the Songtsen Library and Center for Tibetan and Himalayan Studies in Dheradun, where most of the theoretical training took place. During the summer, the young trainees did field work in the village of Wanla, where the presence of the conservation experts, architects, conservation scientists, and historians of the Achi Association provided them with opportunities for hands-on learning and direct participation in their activities.



3 Members of the Achi Association in dialogue with Wanla villagers. From left to right: John Harrison, Ernesto Noriega, Martina Oeter, Deldan Angmo (Alexandra Skedzuhn-Safir, 2010).



4 Students from the Wanla School who participated in the initiative (Ernesto Noriega, 2009).

Pilot Youth Training Program: General principles

Focus on youth

There are several reasons why we focused on the younger generations, initially concentrating our attention on young adults in their late teens and early twenties, followed by the inclusion of school age adolescents. A main argument to work with youth is that it is the young who are living at the epicentre of the transformation taking place in their societies: on the one hand, they are culturally and affectively connected to their communities; and on the other hand, they are the ones most exposed to outside influences and touched by the current forces of change. Standing at this crossroads, they are potentially best suited to mediate between the traditional world and a new emerging reality full of risks as well as opportunities. To a great extent, the choices of this generation will determine

the future evolution of Ladakhi culture and society, including the survival of its built heritage.

Furthermore, young people can be great disseminators and are well positioned to convey the initiative's objectives to their homes and classrooms by facilitating communication channels to different sectors of the community. In particular, the youngest ones have an unmatched capacity to access the elderly, making them very effective agents in the race to identify and record rapidly vanishing memory. More generally, their selfless enthusiasm and thirst for knowledge, their uninhibited creativity, and readiness to act on the courage of their convictions—all quintessential characteristics of youth—can play a crucial role in such an initiative's success. If these energies are well harnessed and applied to safeguard their common heritage, then these young men and women can eventually make an invaluable contribution to their people's struggle for cultural continuity and renewal (fig. 4).

Role of the community

This initiative was founded on the conviction that many of the competences necessary for the conservation of cultural heritage are already present in the communities themselves, even if some of these capacities have in recent years been pushed to the background and have remained dormant. It is the same knowledge and experience that created these monuments, villages, and cultural landscapes in the first place, and also developed the time-tested methods and maintenance practices to effectively guarantee their survival for hundreds of years. Activating historical memory, revitalising traditional skills, and fostering homegrown talent and competences need to be at the centre of any process striving to strengthen the population in their ability to protect their heritage.

Consequently, a central aim of our initiative was to fundamentally reframe the role of the community in the conservation efforts by pushing 'local participation' to go beyond the formalities of consultation and consent or the exercise of subsidiary functions as hired labour. Instead, we encouraged village craftsmen, artists, knowledge-holders, and concerned neighbours to play leading parts at every stage of the process. By honouring local expertise and fostering meaningful



5 Rural vernacular architecture is an important but often neglected element of Ladakh's cultural landscape (Ernesto Noriega, 2009).

community engagement, the initiative sought to support the population in developing a greater sense of agency and control over the destiny of their endangered heritage and to reduce their reliance on external assistance in achieving it.

Multiplying effect

Academics, authorities, and the international conservation community all agree that the cultural heritage of Ladakh is too precious to lose. And indeed, some serious efforts are being made to halt the deterioration of several of its most valued treasures. Nevertheless, having to deal with such a vast region and with so many objects at risk, only a small fraction of this heritage can be cared for and much of it will never have a chance to be considered for intervention. Even in the case of the few emblematic, historical monuments that are successfully conserved, the benefits might prove to be short-lived unless their appropriate and sustained upkeep is guaranteed. Furthermore, as the regions' villages begin to expand and modernise, these iconic buildings will likely wind up standing isolated as decontextualised fragments of history, engulfed by utterly transformed townscapes and degraded cultural landscapes.

As an attempt to overcome these limitations and offer a more comprehensive response, the youth initiative explored ways to widen the reach and scope of the conservation efforts, both in order to cover more territory and to attend to more objects, including buildings that might normally be given secondary priority from an art-historical point of view. We pursued an inclusive approach that also contemplated village and rural architecture, landscape elements, and everything else the communities considered valuable. To accomplish this, a key aspect in our strategy was to capacitate and consolidate a core group of well-informed, skilled, and motivated heritage custodians and promoters, who would in turn share their acquired skills and experience with local leaders, monastic authorities, teachers, students, and the general population. The objective was to trigger a multiplying effect to eventually enable communities to muster their own responses to basic conservation challenges (fig. 5).

Heritage's power to empower

The Ladakhi people certainly appreciate their cultural heritage, and especially the elderly enjoy a particularly affective rapport with the religious art and architecture, which are among their most cherished goods. Besides the beneficial role they have traditionally played in the region's evolution, we believe that the historical monuments also possess a unique potential to serve the population in these turbulent times, a potential which remains largely untapped today: it is their capacity to inspire and empower a new generation of Ladakhis, who are the actual heirs to this heritage but who are becoming increasingly estranged from it. We believe that, given the opportunity to discover and closely study these buildings and thereby becoming aware of the sophistication and genius of their ancestors who built them, youth will develop a stronger sense of pride in their people's history and culture, and

will grow more confident in their capacity to construct their communities in consonance with the example and values of their forebears.

The initiative offered the young trainees various opportunities to reconnect and directly interact with this cultural heritage in creative and meaningful ways. The expectation was that through this experience they would recognise the valuable lessons offered by the art and architecture of the past, lessons which are relevant to their lives today and which can help them tackle present challenges. By grasping the fundamental role historical monuments can play as mainstays of social cohesion and symbols of identity, the young participants understood how valuable their heritage can be in helping their communities navigate this moment of unprecedented disruption. With this realisation, their commitment to its preservation grew, no longer as an option, but as an existential necessity (fig. 6).



6 Historical buildings, embodying the genius of Ladakhis' ancestors, can inspire and empower a young generation that is becoming increasingly estranged from its cultural roots (Ernesto Noriega, 2010).

Objectives and implementation

The pilot initiative lasted three years with workshops starting in Dehradun in early 2009 and culminating in Wanla in the fall of 2011. Its stated goals were:

- To consolidate a core group of young Ladakhi women and men dedicated to the study of their architectural and artistic heritage, and committed to its preservation and promotion.
- To generate opportunities for these youth to explore the works of their ancestors and reconnect with the knowledge and historical memory of their elders.
- To provide them with the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively protect this heritage, exposing them to both traditional maintenance practices as well as contemporary conservation science and technologies.
- To raise awareness among the Ladakhi population, especially in rural communities, drawing attention to the fragility and imminent loss of their cultural heritage and encouraging them to take measures to protect and maintain their endangered art and architecture.



7 The core group of participants included young monks, nuns, and college students from 12 villages across Ladakh (Songtsen Library staff, 2009).

Securing a mandate

The very first step in preparation of this undertaking was to find common ground with all the local stakeholders who would be implicated in this initiative, especially village authorities, heads of monasteries, schoolteachers, parents, and youth leaders. To achieve this, we held a series of information and consultation meetings, during which we thoroughly explained the motivation, objectives, and expected results of the actions we were proposing. We answered questions, received valuable input, and discussed possible areas of cooperation. A wide consensus was reached that such an effort was urgently needed. It was only after this point—once having obtained a clear mandate from the community—that we proceeded to finalise the programme's details and made plans for its implementation.

Trainer team

This initiative hugely benefited from the professional capacities and experience of Achi Association's multidisciplinary pool of specialists. General programme development, coordination and planning, as well as overall facilitation was carried out by Ladakhi conservation architect Deldan Angmo and by myself. Specialised training units were led by conservation expert Martina Oeter, and architects John Harrison and Mauro Bertagnin. On the occasion of a field course, we could count on a complete team of experts (see below). Some external resource persons, such as Ladakhi local historian Sonam Phuntsog and Tibetan US-based architect and Buddhist monk Tenzin Thokme, also made important contributions to the training process.

Selection of participants

When choosing the initiative's core group of trainees, we targeted predominantly Ladakhi young men and women who we expected to later play an important role in the future of the region's cultural heritage. This included nuns and monks who would one day assume the stewardship of the monasteries and temples, students who as professionals would eventually occupy positions of influence, and the village youth whose daily lives would always be closely

linked to the region's heritage. Furthermore, we attempted to assemble a gender-balanced and diverse group, summoning individuals with distinct interests, talents, and life experiences. In order to maximise the potential multiplier effect of the initiative, we included youth originating from various regions, and brought together representatives from 12 different villages. Together with our local partners, we identified 18 participants, mostly in their early 20s, which conformed the core group of participants. Additionally, 16 school students from the village of Wanla, aged between 14 and 18, joined the core group in some activities and took part in separate training units (fig. 7).

Training format and programme

The central element of the initiative was a sequence of seven immersion workshops that took place every few months, alternating between Dehradun and Wanla. The workshops were like a golden thread that ran throughout the entire three years, with each training unit built upon the previous one. During the immersion workshops, which lasted three or four weeks, all participants lived and worked together and had the opportunity to focus exclusively on the subjects at hand. The learning programme included theoretical courses, hands-on exercises, study excursions, practical field work, and individual projects. As a complement to this training, during the holidays when the participants returned to their home villages, they were assigned to document local heritage, identify knowledge holders, assess possible conservation needs, and pass on the acquired concepts and skills to their neighbours and peers.

Every stage of the programme was designed with a specific focus and objective in mind. Broadly speaking, the first year emphasised the study of Ladakh's art and architecture, including through direct interaction with this material heritage; the second year was mostly dedicated to capacity building in conservation science and practice; finally, during the third year, participants applied their acquired knowledge and skills in concrete projects. The following paragraphs describe a few of the training components and activities implemented as part of the three-year programme.



8 Core group during a three-day heritage tour, shown here at Hemis monastery surrounding their guide, local historian Sonam Phuntsog (Ernesto Noriega, 2009).

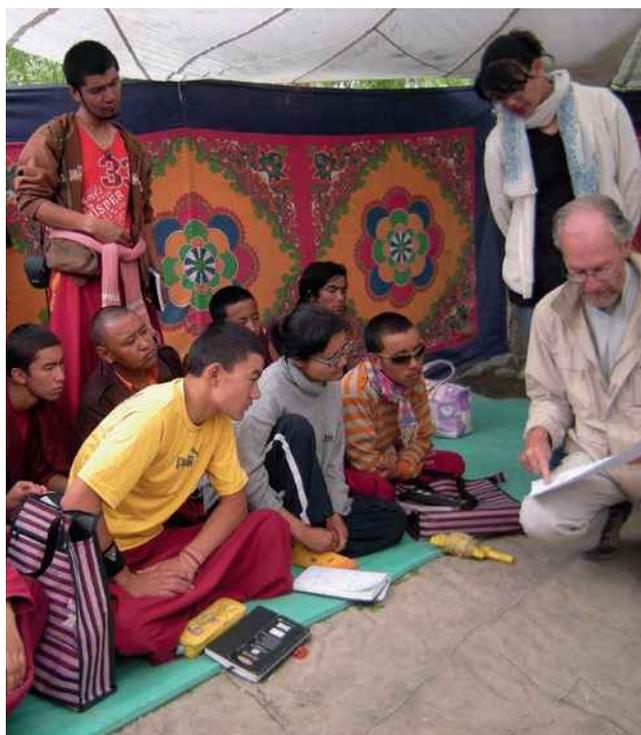
Discovering heritage

The initial sessions allowed the core group of participants to frame the question of cultural preservation—and in particular the significance and fate of their material heritage—in the context of their own lives and that of their communities. Furthermore, they were given an in-depth look into the principles, technologies, and historical evolution of Ladakhi and Himalayan art and building traditions, as well as the close linkage between heritage, the way of life,

and the formation of cultural identities. This exploration was followed by a three-day heritage tour led by a local historian, which gave direct access to several of the oldest and most outstanding monasteries in the region. In addition, they could witness the impact of uncontrolled tourism on a historical site (Alchi), appreciate the merits of sensible restoration work (Munshi House in Leh), and inspect the possibilities of combining traditional and modern architectural elements (White Lotus School at Shey) (fig. 8).

Architectural documentation

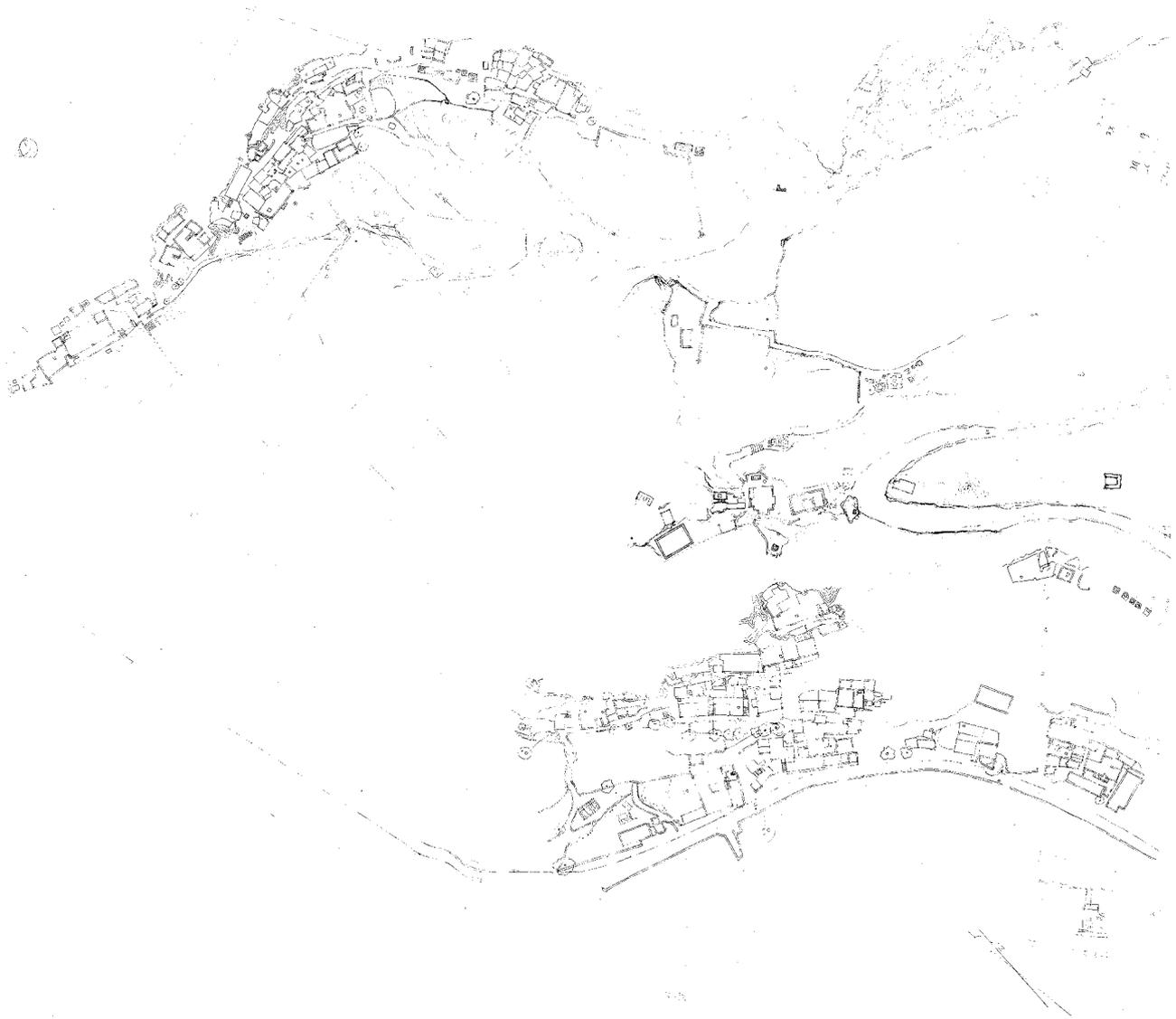
The members of the core group acquired the necessary tools to survey and document architecture. They learned elementary drafting skills to interpret and produce basic technical drawings such as plans, sections, and elevations. Applying these skills, they produced a thorough documentation of the monumental complex at Wanla, encompassing the Avalokiteshvara Temple and fortification towers, as well as the two adjacent village sectors that flank it. They then elaborated a full set of measured drawings, including a comprehensive site plan and sections. They supplemented this documentation with photographs, artistic sketches, and interviews with elderly members of the community (figs. 9–12).



9 | John Harrison and Deldan Angmo at our training campsite in Wanla, instructing the group how to document and produce measured drawings of the entire village (Ernesto Noriega, 2009).



10 | 11 | Core group members carrying out a full physical survey of Wanla, recording all buildings, religious structures, pathways, and productive spaces in the village complex (Ernesto Noriega, 2009).



12 Measured sketch map of Wanla produced by the group: the monumental area with the Avalokiteshvara Temple in the centre and the village sectors of Zomal (top) and Namtses (bottom) (Pilot Youth Training Group, 2010).



13 Core group member Konchok Motup teaching Wanla school students how to make measured plans (Ernesto Noriega, 2009).

Learning conservation

Two courses on the science of conservation were offered to the core group: the first was given by Martina Oeter on the different characteristics, typical pathologies, and proper maintenance of earthen buildings, as well as traditional Ladakhi painting techniques. A second course, given by Mauro Bertagnin, covered the traditional building technologies used in Ladakh, such as *pakbu* (sun-dried earthen bricks) and *gyapak* (rammed earth) among others. These were supplemented by an intensive ten-day field course, facilitated by conservation scientist Christine Bläuer, conservators Alexandra Skedzuhn, Martina Oeter and Heike Pfund, as well as architects Hilde Vets and John Harrison. The trainees learned to identify structural pathologies in buildings and received instruction in the treatment of wall paintings and sculptures.

Involving local youth

The first year included a workshop for Wanla youth between the ages of 14 and 18. Sixteen girls and boys from the local school took part in a three-week programme that included raising awareness of their heritage and a series of practical activities. Jigmet Namgyal and Konchok Motup, two members of the core group, played a central role as facilitators and had the opportunity to pass on their recently acquired skills to these younger trainees, who then accompanied them in their field activities for the following two years. Under their guidance, the younger students documented some of the local heritage, such as the old Lhompö House and the ancient access pathway to the Avalokiteshvara Temple. They also played a fundamental role in the identification of threatened structures in the village and made recommendations—after consulting relatives and neighbours—as to which endangered buildings should receive immediate attention. These suggestions were later acted upon by the Achi Association (figs. 13–16).



14 Wanla students interviewing villagers about their history and cultural traditions (Ernesto Noriega, 2009).



15 Wanla school students measuring the *chortens* along the ceremonial pathway to the Avalokiteshvara Temple (Ernesto Noriega, 2009).

Conservation work at Wanla

One of the suggestions the Wanla students made resulted in a tangible conservation project in the village: the restoration of a portion of the ceremonial pathway leading up to the temple, and in particular focusing on the great Kagan Chorten and the wall paintings in its interior. This intervention, which took six weeks to complete, was a collaboration of the initiative's core group of trainees, the Achi Association professionals, and the Wanla community members spearheaded by the school students. As mentioned above, the students had already documented the entire footpath and several religious structures lined along it. They had also organised a clean-up campaign of the area, interviewed village elders on its history, and

consulted with the families associated to the *chorten*. The restitution of this important ceremonial pathway and *chorten* was used as an occasion to demonstrate an exercise in conservation and to illustrate how a collaborative effort can produce a tangible benefit to the community.¹

Assessment of the initiative and next steps

Almost forty young Ladakhis—monks, nuns, college students as well as younger school girls and boys—had the opportunity to enhance their awareness about the value of their cultural heritage and were provided with knowledge and skills that enabled them to become involved in its preservation. The Pilot Youth Training Program showed how once these young people understood that the



16 Wanla students translating their measurements into accurate drawings of the ceremonial pathway (Ernesto Noriega, 2009).

works of their forebears were in jeopardy, and that their survival might ultimately be up to them, they responded with an earnest willingness to take up that responsibility. Realising the many ways in which this heritage is linked to the wellbeing of their communities, and even to their own lives and futures, they became animated by a sense of urgency and commitment that infused their actions throughout the entire process. Their enthusiasm made it possible for every phase of the initiative to be completed and most of the planned activities were successfully conducted, in spite of the many obstacles met along the way.

We did have some regrettable setbacks as well. The four young nuns, who were among the most dedicated participants of the core group, were pulled back by their

institution and not allowed to continue after the end of the first year. The unprecedented sight of them working shoulder to shoulder with monks, day in and day out and in public, had apparently raised a few eyebrows. Another reversal was the cancellation of a local public exhibition featuring the documentation of the temple and village of Wanla. This was caused by the terrible natural catastrophes that ravaged the region in July and August of 2010, including torrential rains, flooding, and landslides that destroyed roads and bridges, devastated villages, and cost a thousand people their lives. Another disappointment came after one of the young monks, who had become very engaged in the documentation of buildings and drawing of plans, decided to study architecture only to see his

dream frustrated. We made inquiries, but unfortunately his monastic schooling did not qualify him to even take an admission test. This was a huge letdown for him personally as well as a loss for the cause of cultural preservation in the region.

By the end of the three-year programme, several of the participants had developed a clear vision of the leading role they wanted to play in the protection of their people's heritage. They were committed to becoming custodians and promoters of this legacy and they had developed a strategy on how to achieve it. They saw their role as complementary to the one traditionally played by most national or international conservation agencies and organisations whose priority is to preserve the most prominent monuments possessing high art-historical value. The participants, for their part, would focus their attention on the countless historical structures existing in the villages, which are often neglected but immensely valuable to the communities. They underpinned their plan with a detailed mission statement, outlining the scope and working

principles that would guide their future activities (see box below).

To do this, they advanced a plan to actively enhance community-based conservation efforts. In it, they proposed to promote the importance of conservation in every village, actively involving the population at large and identifying skilled and knowledgeable individuals who, together with the local youth, could act together as a network of 'conservation first responders'. These first responders would carry out conservation monitoring and reporting, recognise potential problems early on, perform basic maintenance and repair, and know when to bring in the experts. Our young custodians from the Pilot Youth Training Program would support the communities in this endeavour and would serve as a link between the villages and monasteries on the one side, and the professionals and relevant conservation agencies and institutions, on the other. Part of the group's dream was to become a mobile, itinerant education team by acquiring and customising a small bus that would allow them to reach even the most remote villages.

Mission statement by the Achi Association's young heritage custodians, 2011

Our mission is to protect our cultural and natural heritage. Ladakh's building traditions and the efficiently managed landscapes are our pride and we will try our best to preserve them.

We aim:

- To raise the level of awareness in the villages regarding the protection of the local cultural and natural heritage. To further this goal, we would like to carry out campaigns including workshops, exhibitions, drama performances, and the distribution of informative booklets.
- To not limit our work to *gompas* (monasteries) and other religious structures, but to aim at protecting villages and the entirety of the cultural landscape as a valuable part of our heritage.
- To include in our work even the most remote villages, which are often neglected for being outside of the commercial system or the tourism circuit. It is these villages that also keep much of their traditional features intact.
- To work closely with communities, consult the elders, and involve local masons, carpenters, and artists instead of bringing cheap labour from outside.
- To promote the repair rather than the destruction and replacement of old buildings, adhering to the use of traditional techniques and the use of local materials.
- To care not only for important buildings but also promote the general improvement of village sanitation and infrastructure, as well as the introduction of catastrophe prevention measures.
- To stop the degradation in housing quality. New construction is much less responsive to our harsh climatic conditions than the traditional practices. We are already seeing the consequences of the use of cement, especially its impact on the health of children and the elderly.



17 The historical Khar, towering over the village of Skurbuchan (Ernesto Noriega, 2011).

The Skurbuchan Khar:

A blueprint for community-centred conservation

Shortly after the completion of the Pilot Youth Training Program and having joined the Achi Association India, some of its participants were eager to put into practice their acquired skills and the community-based approach which they had developed and put forward towards the end of the programme. One of them, Gen Konchok Motup, introduced a proposal to rescue the endangered Skurbuchan Khar, a historical palace-tower which is still in use as a temple. Gen Motup, himself a young monk of the local monastery, had been the caretaker of this building for a

period of three years and during this time he had watched helplessly as it deteriorated; he now feared its imminent collapse. His enthusiasm and commitment to save this historic structure, which was also a long-time ambition of the community, won over several of his fellow alumni from the youth training initiative. Together they embarked on their first self-promoted conservation project. As a leading expert to direct the work, they secured the participation of Achi architect John Harrison, a staunch advocate for the preservation of the Khar. They also received partial funding from the Achi Association India. The restoration of the Skurbuchan Khar was undertaken



18 Local Skurbuchan youth collecting material for the roof cover (Ernesto Noriega, 2012).



19 Achi India Youth group members Tonyot Namgyal, Konchok Rinchen and Jigmet Namgyal, working on the roof of the Khar, under the direction of local *mistri* Kaga (Ernesto Noriega, 2012).

between 2012 and 2016 with the community playing a central role from the onset. John Harrison described the experience as follows:

Gen Motup was keen to see the Khar restored, and his enthusiasm reignited the interest in the village. Village and monastery together formed a Khar committee to monitor building work and to collect [further] funds. [...] The village had been collecting money for work on the Khar since 1998, and had opened a dedicated bank account, but when the Achi team started on site with two local *mistris* (master builders) there was further enthusiastic support in the form of donations of money, building materials, food for the team, and voluntary labour. Young monks from the Skurbuchan monastery joined the youth team to work along with the *mistris*, and refused to accept payment for their labour. [...] Students from the local secondary school, who also helped carrying bricks, were given tours of the building. [...] The Khar became a community project, not just the restoration of a historic building.²

The successful intervention at Skurbuchan points to the benefits of initiatives that are truly anchored in the local

communities and which reflect their immediate concerns and aspirations. It demonstrates what is possible when the primary stakeholders—the village councils or monasteries—become the main drivers of the process and when efforts are made to tap into local capacities and knowledge. It also clearly reveals the readiness on the part of the communities to assume a high degree of responsibility for such a project, as much through direct physical participation, logistical, and financial support. The satisfactory completion of work at Skurbuchan is a significant achievement that bears testimony to the value of establishing truly horizontal partnerships and complementary forms of cooperation between the expert community and the population (figs. 17–20).

As this experience shows, Achi India's young heritage custodians are ideally placed to play a crucial part in



20 Skurbuchan school students, at the back of the Khar, during a guided tour of the ongoing conservation work (Ernesto Noriega, 2012).

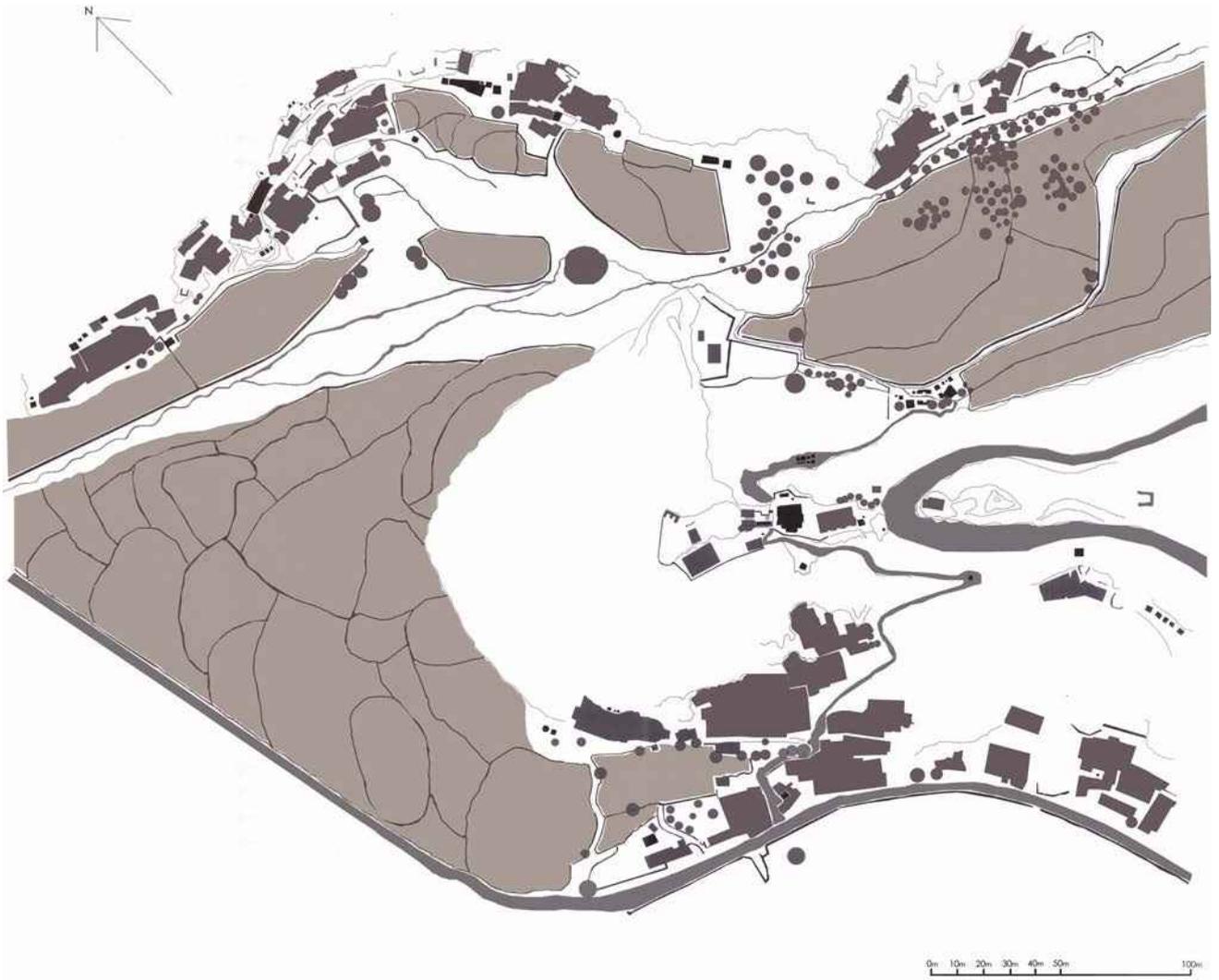
promoting such a model of conservation. Having grown up in the villages provides them with the necessary local insight, connections, and common language, which they can effectively use to inspire their neighbours and mobilise local energies. Moreover, through their training and interaction with external professionals and practitioners, they can also act as a bridge between the communities and

the national and international agencies and organisations dedicated to heritage preservation. Hopefully this project sets a precedent to encourage more community-driven initiatives in the region and prompt continued investment in the training and empowerment of local youth so that they can realise their potential as key protagonists in a more inclusive and sustainable approach to conservation.

- 1 See chapter 7 by Hilde Vets et al., pp. 95–123 in this volume.
- 2 Harrison, John (in press) Skurbuchan Khar: Its Architecture, History and Conservation. in: Christian Luczanits & Heinrich Poell (eds.): Buddhist

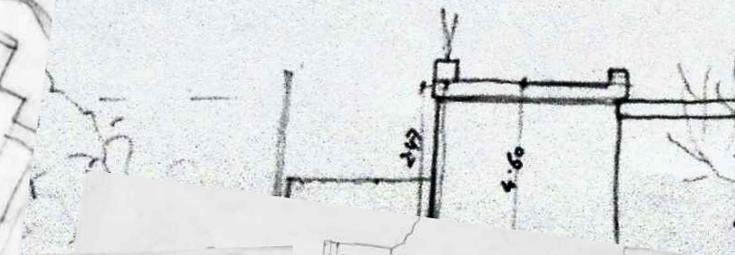
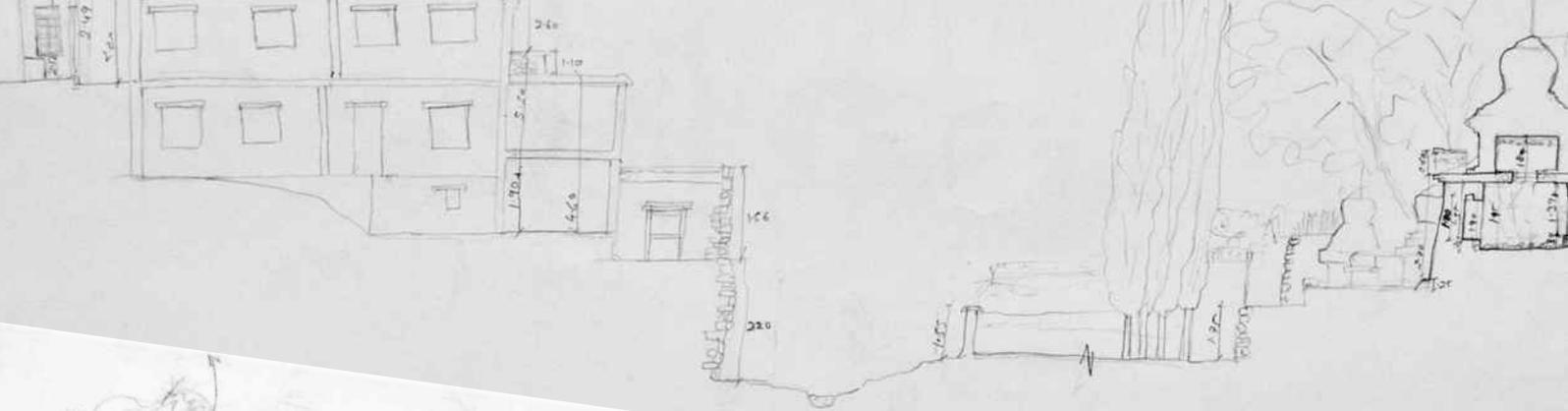
Heritage in the Western Himalaya: Essays on the Art, Architecture and Religious History of Ladakh. Delhi: Studio Orientalia.

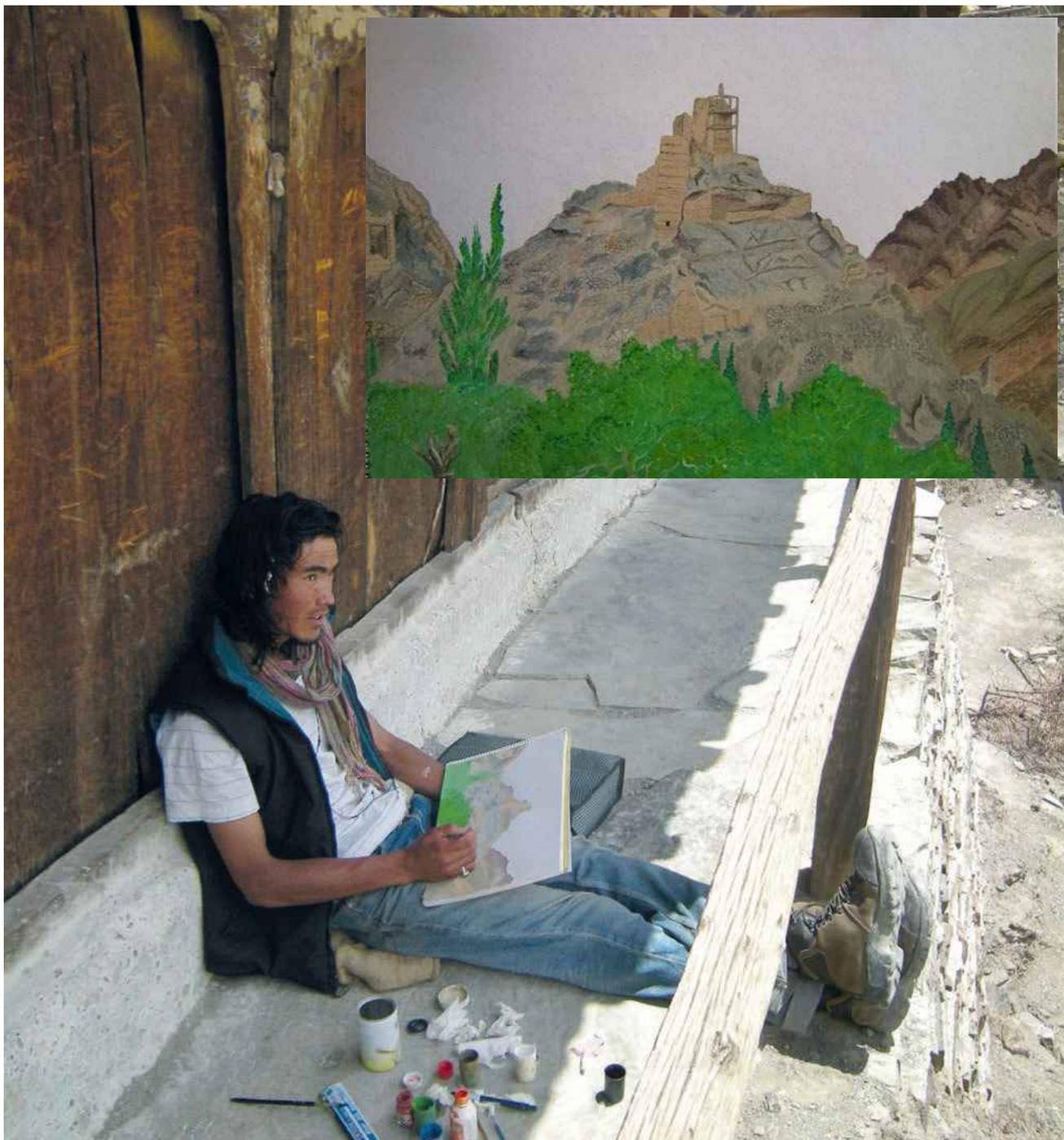
Drawings produced by the members of the Pilot Youth Training Program



Village of WANLA
Namtses & Zomal

Site Plan





Tsewang Stanzin, member of the youth group, sketching a watercolor of the Wanla castle tower (Ernesto Noriega, 2009).