

The Mandala as a Cosmic Model: Integrating Temple Architecture within the Tibetan Buddhist Landscape

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INTRODUCTION

The mandala as a Buddhist cosmic model of organizing the spiritual world has received great attention worldwide, especially for its role in Tibetan Buddhist practices and its symbolism in religious architecture. Surprisingly, among the volumes written about the mandala, few stress the integration of temple architecture with its surrounding landscape. Emphasizing the integrative relationship between architecture and landscape based on field investigations of Tibetan temples throughout China, this paper discusses how the mandala, as a cosmic model, was utilized to shape the Tibetan Buddhist architecture and the cultural landscape, and served to interweave it with nature, architecture, religious meanings, and man's movements.

Tibetan Buddhism is a branch of Tantric Buddhism, originally from India, which has been infused with the Ben religion, indigenous to Tibet. This branch emphasizes the path and practices of the Buddha of enlightenment, and also follows a common Buddhist theme: humanity is suffering the torments of being caught up in the cycle of death and rebirth; and only the Buddha, with his great wisdom and compassion, has the ability to help humans transcend and be liberated from this cycle, in order to reach ultimate enlightenment (Powers, 1995. P.208). As a living religion, Tibetan Buddhism is practiced in Tibet, and in its surrounding regions on the Qingzhang Plateau, and

in Inner Mongolia in China. Also, there are increasing numbers of believers in North America and Western Europe.

In Tibet, every city, town, village, and even every home has its own temple, which provides a focus for the social and spiritual life of the Tibetan community. Tibet once had over 6000 temples. Every important historical event, often linked to a religious revolution, left behind a great temple as an historical mark. Famous temples were concentrated in Tibet, but many were also located in the surrounding regions: Gansu, Qinghai, Sichuan, and Yongnan Provinces. Farther off, many famous temples were located in Inner Mongolia, Beijing, and Chengde.

The wide distribution of Tibetan temples throughout China was the result of historical and political factors. During the Yan Dynasty (1271-1368 AD), the emperors, who were descendents of Genghis Khan of Mongolia, adopted Tibetan Buddhism as the national religion of China. During the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644 AD), to keep peaceful relations with, and to control Tibet and Mongolia, the emperors encouraged the building of Tibetan temples in these two regions. During the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911 AD), Tibetan Buddhism again became the national religion, imperial Tibetan Buddhist temples were built in Beijing and Chengde (northeast of Beijing) (Figure1).

The contents of the Buddhist cosmic model were explained in the *Abhidharmakosa*, an ancient text written by Vasubandhu (fourth or fifth century AD). During primeval times, it was believed that the power of collective actions brought about the universe with winds from the four cardinal directions. The winds filled the empty space and helped to form the clouds, from which water poured. From the water, hurricanes shaped the golden earth. In the center of the golden earth rose a mountain called Mount Meru. In the middle of the square summit-region of Mount Meru lay the palace of the leader of the thirty-three chief Buddhas. At half the height of Mount



Fig. 1. The distribution of Tibetan temples in China. (Temple map by Ping Xu)

Meru, the sun and moon traveled their orbits borne by the wind. Around Mount Meru were seven golden mountain walls, each lower than the one inside it. Between the mountains, the rain created the “inner sea” of fresh water. Outside the lowest golden mountain wall stretched the “great outer ocean” of saltwater. In the ocean, the twelve continents floated, the southern most of which was inhabited by human beings. The great outer ocean, with its twelve continents, was in turn encompassed by an iron mountain wall (Brauen, 1997, P18).

This cosmic model is represented both in three-dimensional and two-dimensional mandalas. The three-dimensional mandala, in various sizes, represents a geographic model of the Buddhist cosmos, Mount Meru (Figure 2); two-dimensional mandalas are painted on cloth or leather, or sprinkled on a flat surface with colored powder, demonstrating Mount Meru in the plan-view. A painting of a mandala, “Tan Cheng” or literally “the altar city” is a symmetrical diagram built up of nesting squares around with concentric circles, presenting the cosmic model in the plan-view (Figure 3). Mandalas are often aids to meditation, visualization, and liberation in ritual ceremonies, as well as in the Tibetan daily life.

This research has been mushrooming and evolving since the summer of 1998, when I first visited Tibet. Tibet’s unique geographical high plain forms a place of religious worship even today. The landscape and architecture, and their integration within the rich Tibetan culture, greatly intrigued me and

beckoned my return. I revisited Tibet in 2002. I also extensively investigated Tibetan temples and villages outside Tibet in the Gansu, Qinghai, Yunnan, Inner Mongolia, and Sichuan Prov-

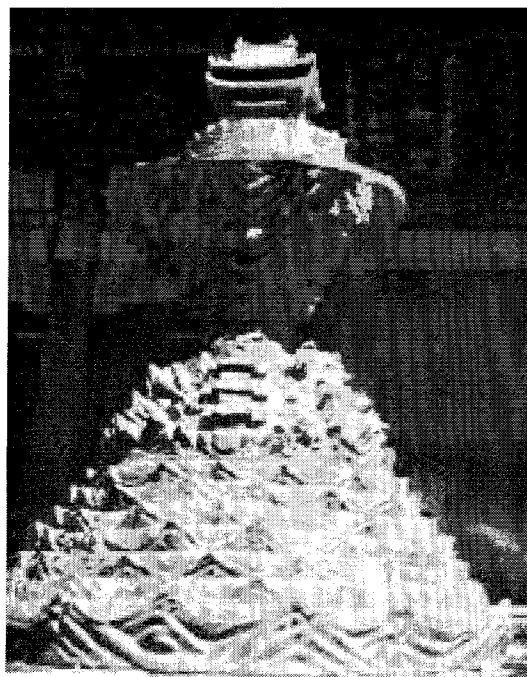


Fig. 2. A bronze sculpture of Mount Meru in the eighteenth-century Yonghe Palace, an important imperial Tibetan Buddhist temple in Beijing. (Photography by Ping Xu, 2002)

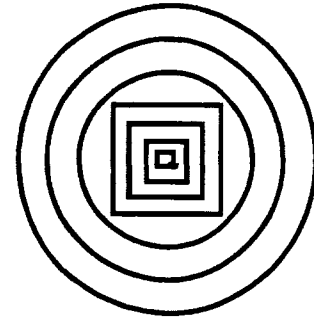
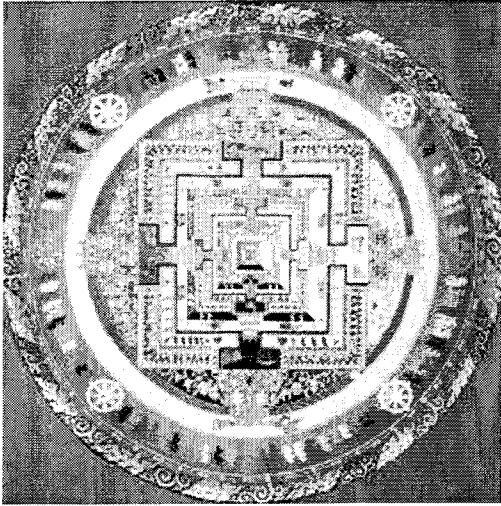


Fig. 3. A painting of the mandala. (Source: Brauen 1997, Plates 45) (Diagram by Ping Xu)

inces. These field investigations greatly enhanced my understanding that Tibetan architecture, landscape, and religious beliefs are woven together, forming a sacred realm. In the Tibetan cultural landscape, the theme of the mandala was present everywhere I went, which in turn inspired me to speculate that the mandala, as a spiritual vehicle and model, shaped Tibetan Buddhist architecture and its relationship to the landscape.

Carrying out this new thought and adding to the existing literature on the mandala, this paper presents the mandala as a cosmic model that shaped the structure of spatial organization of Tibetan architecture and cultural landscape with symbolic systems at multiple levels: a holy mountain, landscape setting, temple complex, Buddha hall, stupa, and stone landmark. Man's movements within architectural spaces are also included.

THE TEMPLE IS A MANDALA

Just as the universe is organized around Mount Meru, a Tibetan temple complex is organized around the highly intensive

architecture of the Buddha tower and the great chant hall. Surrounding these main structures are monastery courtyards which take the shape of flat-roofed vernacular houses. Following the mandala model, stupas, built up with nesting squares and the vertical structure in the center, are commonly placed at the entrance of the temple or a village, symbolically to guard the gate (Figure 4); and stone landmarks, called "Mani Dui", indicate the important turning points along the path toward the temple (Figure 5).

The Buddha towers and the great chant halls are painted red or yellow, with gilded roofs, surmounted by two deer on either side of a golden wheel. Other buildings are often painted white, an auspicious color believed to have the power to ward off evil and to attract luck. On the surrounding hills colorful prayer flags are often placed, inscribed with Buddhist sutras, chanting with the winds and praying for the world (Figure 6).

A Tibetan Buddhist place of worship has three essential ingredients: a statue of the Buddha, an open floor space in front of it, (in which worshippers may pray individually and/or groups of monks may chant), and a perimeter enclosed by thick walls with paintings of the mandala. Around the perimeter,

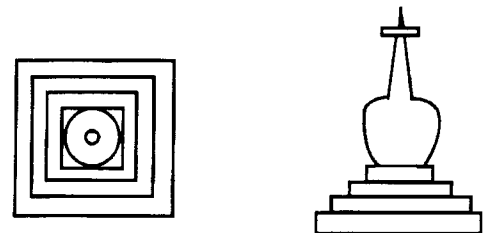
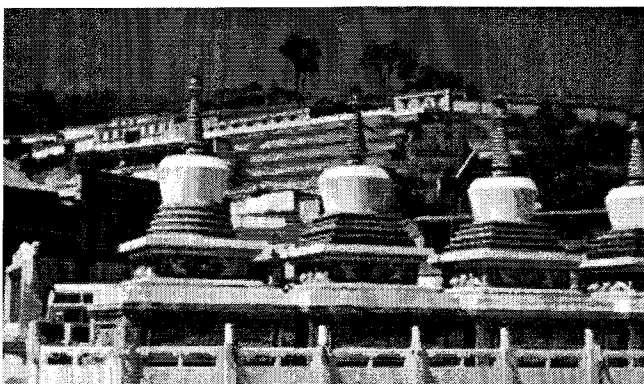


Fig. 4. The stupas at the entrance, Tare temple, Qinghai Province. (Photography and diagram by Ping Xu, 1998)

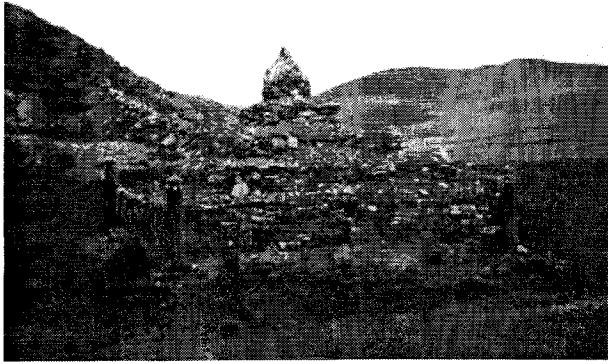
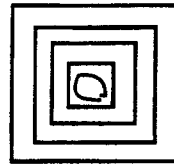


Fig. 5. The “Mani Dui”, a stone mount, was built as a landmark aside the road between two Tibetan temples in Gansu Province. (Photography and diagram by Ping Xu, 2002)



visiting worshippers circumambulate in a clockwise direction. Large temple complexes have square, multistory Buddha towers, and great chant halls with single-story structures and Buddha chambers in the rear section. Buddha towers and great chant halls often face south, which symbolizes the Buddha’s compassion for the human inhabitants of the southern continent. The main axis of these structures often aligns with landscape features, such as mountain peaks or the center of a forest, where deities are believed to dwell.

Historically, many famous Tibetan Buddhist temples throughout China were established under the advice of leading Buddhist masters. They followed the mandala model, not only in selecting the temple sites, but also in directing the plan’s layout and architectural design. The Samye Temple was built in 779 AD under the advice of the Buddhist Master Jihu. The mandala plan later became a model for other Tibetan Buddhist temples. The Samye Temple is located in the center of a valley

at the northern bank of the Yaluzangbu River, a high mountain in the north, with mountain peaks in the southern distance, and a sacred mount in the east (Figure 7).

The Samye Temple outer wall takes the shape of a circle, symbolizing the iron mountain. In the four cardinal directions are halls that represent the four main continents. Four stupas are set in each corner, symbolizing the four divinities who guard the Buddha’s lands. The small buildings on the north-south axis symbolize the sun and moon. The central Buddha tower takes the shape of a square, with a courtyard surrounding it. The main entrance is on the east (Figure 8 and 9).

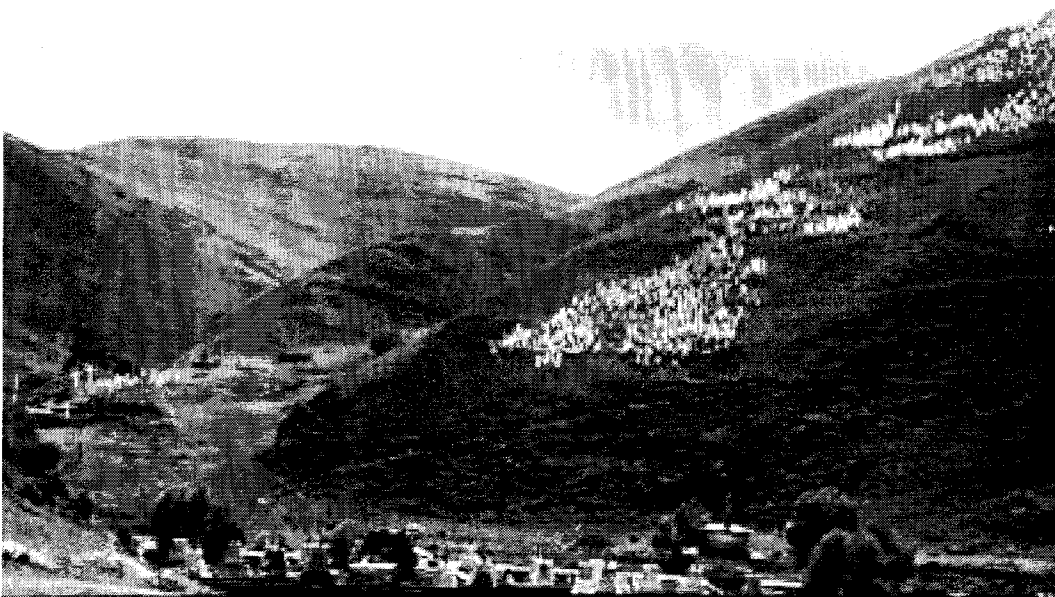


Fig. 6. The prayer flags around the Tagong temple in Sichuan Province. (Photography by Ping Xu, 2002)

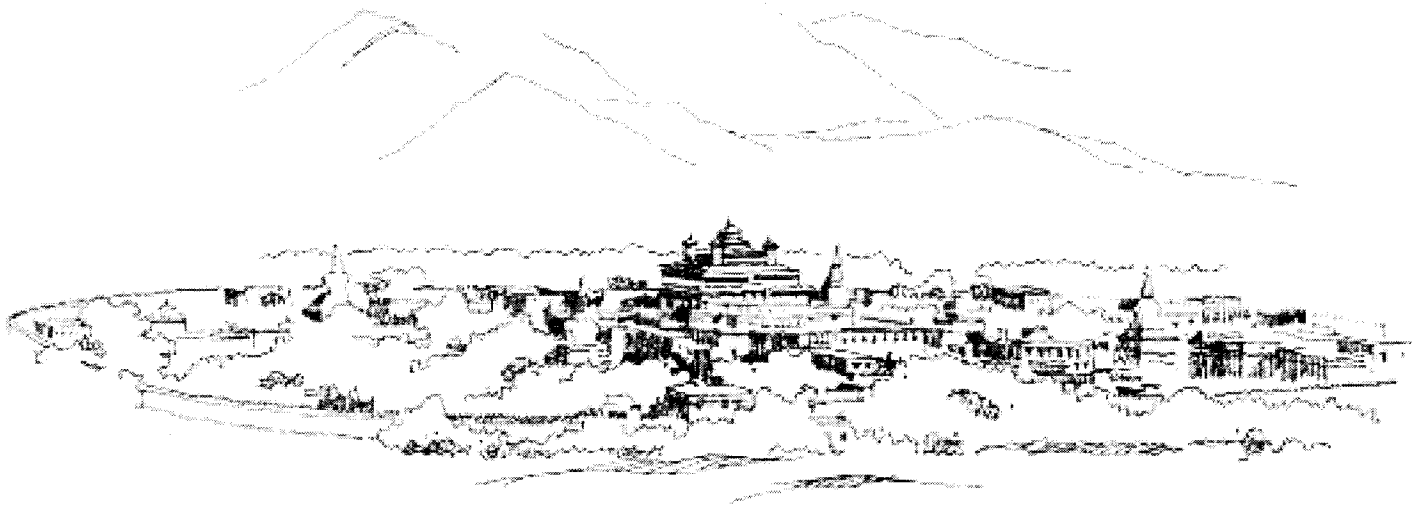
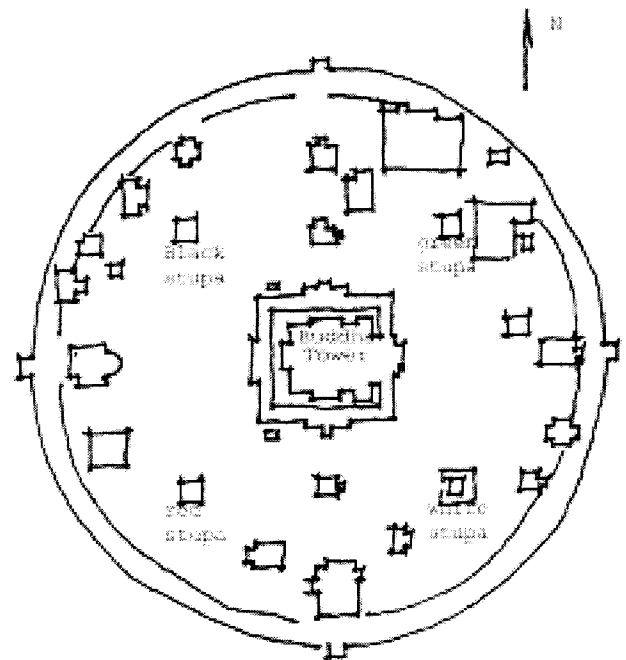


Fig. 7. The Samye Temple in Tsedang, Tibet. (Sketch by Ping Xu)



Fig. 8. The central Buddha tower of the Samye Temple. (Photography by Ping Xu, 1998)



The plan of Samye Temple

Fig. 9. The plan of Samye. (Source: Yang 1996, P.152)



Fig. 10. The plan and section of a Buddha tower. (By Ping Xu)



Fig. 11. Colonnades are around The Buddha tower of the Budala Palace. (Photography by Ping Xu, 1998)

CENTER: THE BUDDHA TOWER BUILT UP WITHIN NESTING SPACES

The center is the most sacred space in the mandala. In the temple, as a spiritual core, the Buddha tower built up within nesting spaces is in the center. The Buddha statue is placed in the center of the Buddha tower, surrounded by an ambulatory passageway for circumambulation by man. The 'central-statue-plus-colonnade' pattern may be repeated on each floor, or the center of the tower may be an open atrium containing a single very large statue, with multistory colonnades on all four walls (Figure 10).

The seventh-century Budala Palace in Lhasa, Tibet. (Figure 11 and 13) and the seventh-century Dazhao temple in Lhasa, Tibet

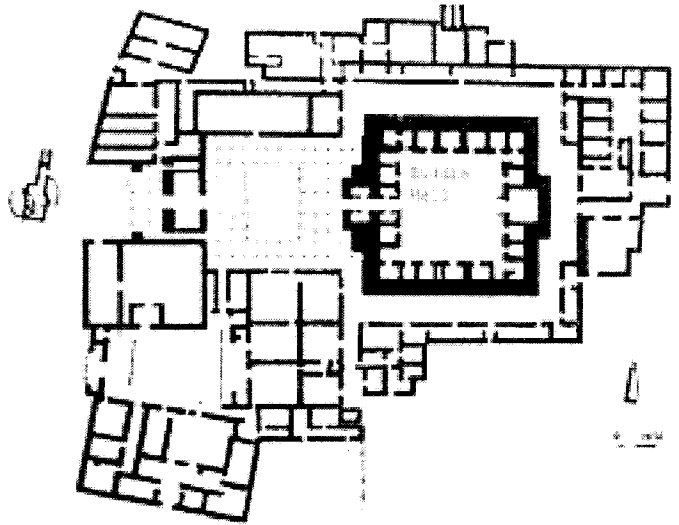


Fig. 12. The plan of the Dazhao Temple. (Source: Yang, 1996, P 149)

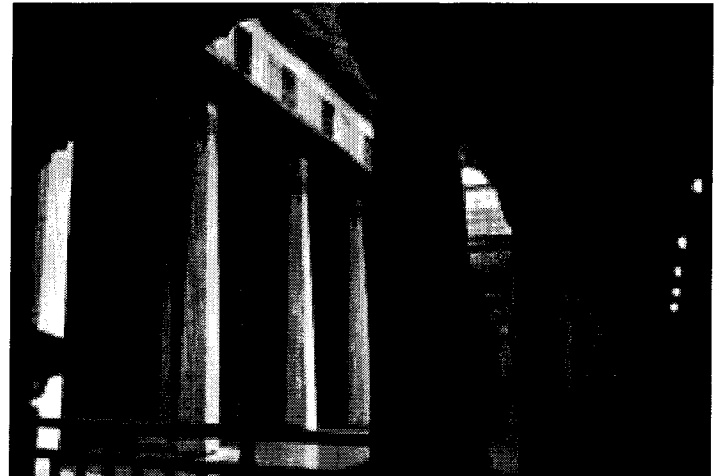


Fig. 13. The Buddha tower of the Budala Palace. (Photography by Ping Xu, 1998)

(Figure 12), with their spatial patterns of a box-in-a-box, creates an ordering sequence which encourages one to seek the center.

Corresponding to the vertical axis of Mount Meru, in Tibetan temples the vertical axis is emphasized in the center of the Buddha's tower. At the Budala Palace in Lhasa, the red palace takes the shape of a square enclosure within a square enclosure. The closer to the center, the smaller the room is, the higher the floor is set, and the more intense is the worship, until one reaches the top center, a flat roof providing open views to the vast horizon where mountains rim the deep blue sky. The sequential experience of the building creates both a physical and mental climax. This hierarchal system in the design of the temple's architectural space, symbolizing the vertical axis of Mount Meru, forms a vehicle for obtaining ultimate liberation, emptiness, and subsequent enlightenment (Figure 14).

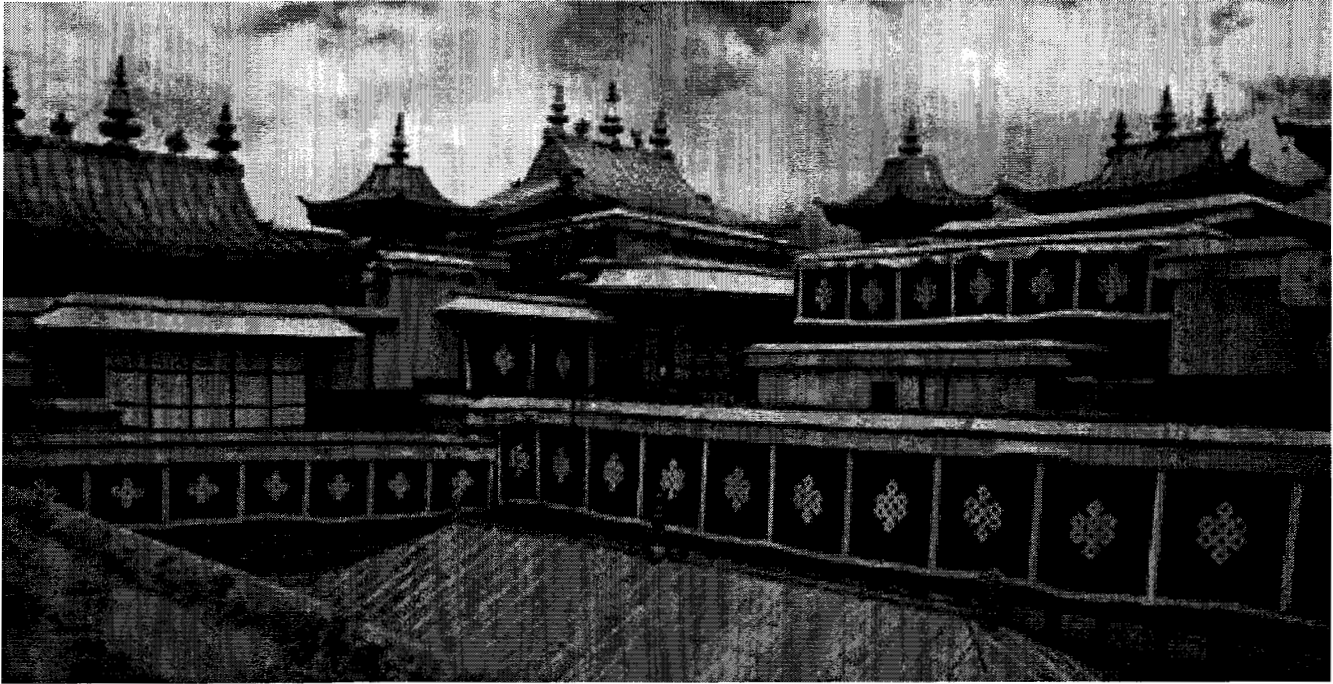


Fig. 14. The center at the top of the Buddala Palace, Tibet. (Photograph by Ping Xu, 1998)

Two eighteenth-century imperial Tibetan temples, built on the south slope of the hills north of the Chengde Summer Palace, provide excellent examples of the nesting spaces in the center of the mandala model. The Putozongcheng Temple was greatly

influenced by the Buddala Palace in Lhasa, Tibet (Figure 15 and 16); the Xumifushou Temple, was greatly influenced by the Jashlunbu Temple in Shigatse, Tibet (Figure 16 and 17). Both temples are dominated by a Buddha hall in the center, and



Fig. 15. The Putozongcheng temple, Chengde. (Photograph by Ping Xu, 1998)

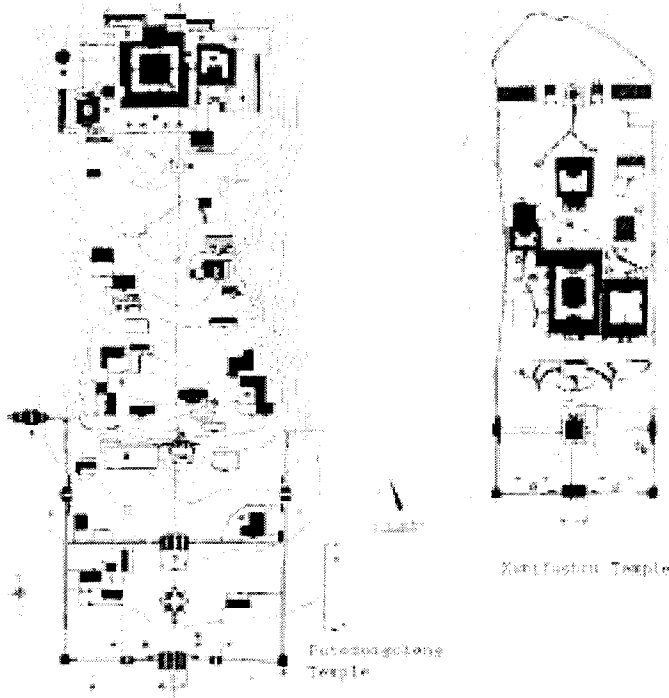


Fig. 16. Plans of the Putozongcheng temple (left), and the Xumifushou temple (right).

have open space between the main hall and the surrounding colonnade.

VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE AS A TRASITION

As in the mandala model, in the Tibetan temple, farther from the center, less intense architecture was utilized, more natural landscape is present, and the more secular is the place. Set on the temple rim, monastery courtyards, taking the shape of a vernacular house, are usually clustered randomly on the slope of the land, thus creating a transition between the central architecture and the surrounding landscape (Figure 18).

The architectural design of the Joshlonbu Temple and the Labuleng Temple have a homelike feeling because they imitate the architectural vocabulary of Tibetan villages with flat roofs, thick clay or stone walls, often painted white, tapered up two or three floors high with trapezoidal windows (Figure 19). The random organization of monastery courtyards forms a twisted access to different sections of the temple. As one walks between the yards, the angled path provides rich images that change at every turning point (Figure 20). The contrast with this simple vernacular architectural matrix makes the Buddha halls stand out, even while it mixes the secular with the sacred.

Temple complexes were created to help people visualize the temple as a symbol of the sacred lands of the Buddha. On the other hand, in Tibetan temples particularly, the monastery courtyards often provide an atmosphere of "home." Inheriting the knowledge of the Tibetan vernacular village, Tibetan

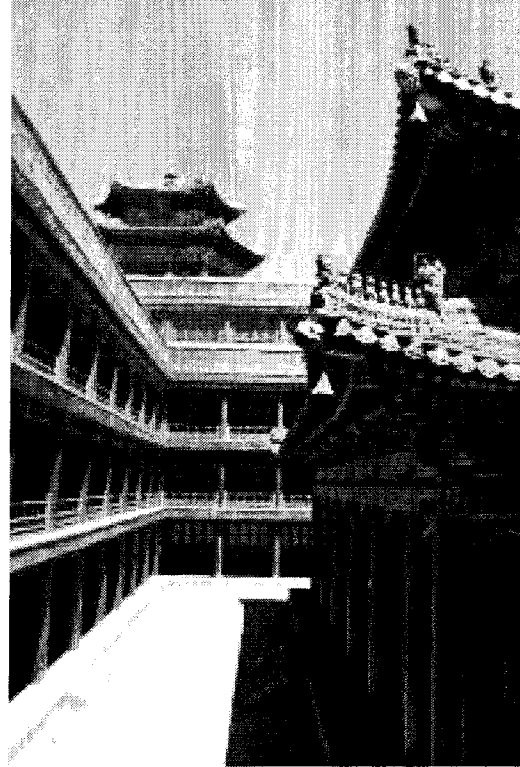


Fig. 17. The Xumifushou temple. (Photograph by Ping Xu, 1998) (Source: Chen 1995, P.218 and P.225)

temple complexes have developed a duality intended to aid people in the understanding that the sacred Buddha land is a place where everyone can arrive, if they follow Buddhist practices.

LANDSCAPE SETTINGS DEFINE A LARGE-SCALED MANDALA SPACE

In Tibet, the vast plateau, deep blue skies, snow-covered mountains, unpredictable weather, simultaneous beauty and danger, richness and emptiness, all form a complex matrix which together affect the design of temples. In turn, the Buddhist temples are believed by Tibetans to provide the power to suppress and subdue the demons and evil energy in the land, making the land itself holy.

Corresponding to Mount Meru, as a reference point for concentrically arranged continents and oceans, the temple embodies the sacred places of the Buddha, providing merit for the worshipper. Tibetan temples are often located in a central spot; instead of constructing the temple itself as an architectural mountain, Tibetans place the temple with the summit of a mountain behind it. Borrowing the view of the mountain summit and integrating it into the slope, the temple with its surrounding landscape is viewed as a mandala, an un-separated spatial unit (Figure 21).

Water is very important, not just to the temple community's survival, but for its religious significance. In correspondence

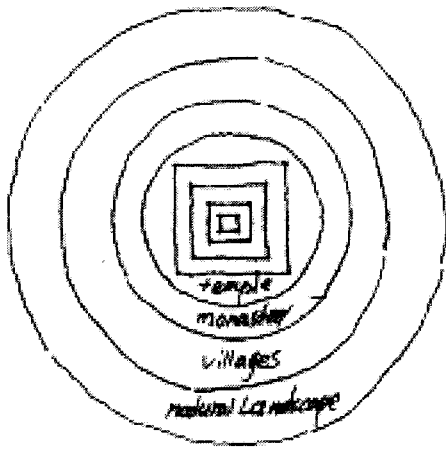


Fig. 18. Vernacular architecture forms a transition between temple architecture and natural landscape. (By Ping Xu)

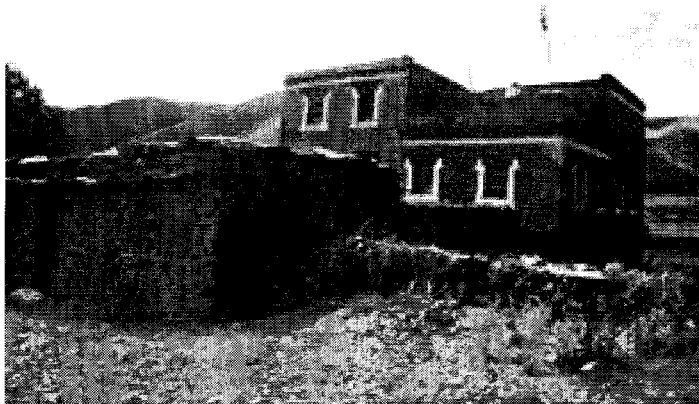


Fig. 19. A Tibetan vernacular house, in Sichuan Province. (Photography by Ping Xu, 2002)

with the mandala, the temple represents the Buddhists' sacred land beyond the salty ocean separating the human continent from the Buddha. This salty ocean also symbolizes human suffering from the torments of being caught up in the cycle of death and rebirth. For an ideal temple site, a river flows in front

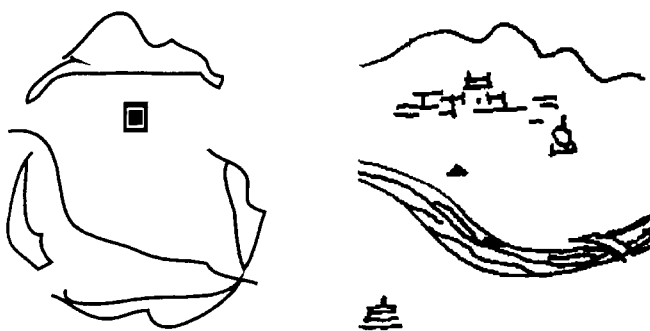


Fig. 21. Landscape settings define a large-scaled mandala space framed by mountains and water. (By Ping Xu)



Fig. 20. The Labuleng temple in Gansu Province. (Photography by Ping Xu, 2002)

of the temple, with a road opposite. When walking on the road, people look at the temple across the river. The scene of the temple with mountains behind it forms a mandala image in their minds, thus evoking their worship and attracting them to enter.

The seventh-century Budala Palace in Lhasa, Tibet, is located on the south slope of the hill, with mountain ranges behind, and mountain peaks to the south in the distance. The Lahsa River flows to its south. Integrated within the surrounding landscape, the Budala Palace is viewed as Mount Meru in the Tibetans' hearts (Figure 22 and 23).

The fifteenth-century Jashlunbu Temple in Shigatse (Figure 24) and the eighteenth-century Labuleng Temple in Gansu Province (Figure 25 and 26) both were built on the south side of a hill with a gentle, wide-open slope, the summits of the mountain behind it resembling the embracing form of a lotus flower, and a river meandering in front of the temple. Such landscape settings have become a typical model for Tibetan temple site selection.

CIRCUMAMBULATION AROUND ARCHITECTURE AND LANDSCAPE

The most significant ritual of spiritual perfection in Tibetan Buddhism is circumambulation, which proceeds in a clockwise direction around a stone landmark, stupa, temple complex, Buddha tower, or inside the hall of a temple. A pilgrimage circumambulating the holy mountains, a symbol of the Mount Meru, may take several weeks (Figure 27).

The summit of the mountains and the center of lakes are considered to be the positions of deities. Tibetans believe that circumambulations can purify their lives and lead to liberation, and they will then be able to go to the continent of the Buddha (Karmay, 1988, P75). When people circumambulate around these structures, the mandala model, a symmetrical diagram

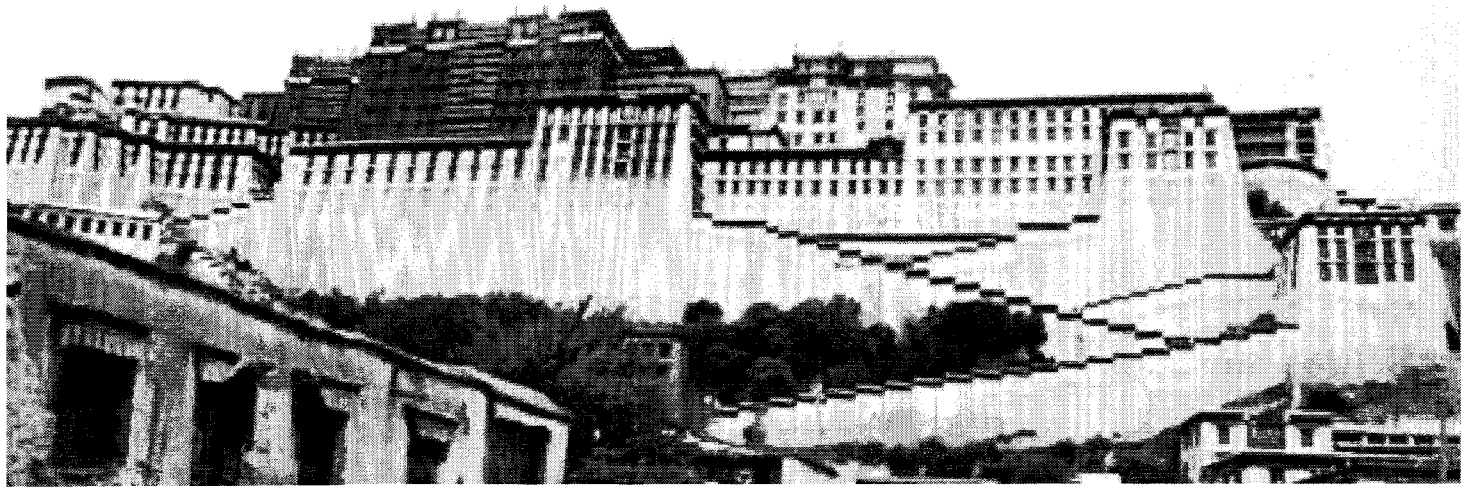


Fig. 22. The Budala Palace. Lhasa. (Photograph by Ping Xu, 1998)

built up of nesting squares around with concentric circles, is completed (Figure 28).

As a vehicle for transmitting people's hopes to the Buddha, circumambulation is translated into the temple architecture which is furnished with ambulatory passageways at various scales. People start at the outer colonnade, with its rows of prayer wheels, turning each wheel in turn (Figure 29). In some temples, such as the Dazhao Temple in Lhasa, the circumambulation starts in the street around the temple. Then people circumambulate inside the great hall, then climb up to circumambulate the colonnades, until they reach the top of the temple.

The Baiju Temple was built in 1414 AD in Jiangzi, Tibet, located on a south-facing slope surrounded by hills with a river (Yang 1996, P.426). The base of the building has four layers,

symbolizing the four elements of air, fire, water, and earth. Every layer is a floor of Buddha halls and niches. The temple has 77 Buddha halls and niches, and over 3000 Buddha statues (Figure 30). This temple is circumambulated spirally on several stories, up to the most important Buddha hall. Moving through the temple is like walking through a mandala palace. Walking through the stepped path to the top Buddha niche is visualized as climbing the stair to reach the top level of Buddha's realm, a formless emptiness of eternal liberation and enlightenment. This temple's form manifests the path along which the circumambulation in the physical place, as well as in the human mind, progresses and spirals up to the spiritual climax.

CONCLUSIONS

The mandala, as a cosmic model, symbolizes the universe as centered on the Buddha's dwelling place. As a common ancient belief, this cosmic model works in the macro world as well as the micro world. In Tibetan cultural landscape, the mandala model for the macro space, was transferred to architecture and its surrounding landscape in a relatively micro space. At every level of various scales, the structure of spatial organization follows the mandala as its model, which serves the religious purpose that Buddha is with you everywhere. As a result, architecture, nature and religious beliefs are interwoven in the Tibetan cultural landscape. Figure 31 presents the mandala pattern of architecture, landscape, and man's movement, and the integrative relationship between them. It also provides a summary of this paper.

The mediums used to design architectural and landscape spaces are different. Closer to the center of a temple, architectural design was applied: stone-walled Buddha towers were built up within nesting spaces. Farther from the architectural center, more design solutions were made with the thought of landscape planning: landscape settings define a large-scaled mandala

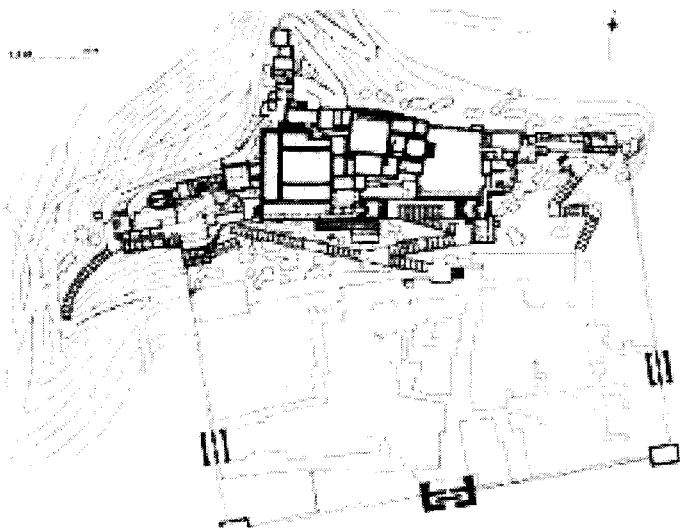


Fig. 23. The plan of the Budala Palace. Lhasa. (Source: Liu, 1984, P.382)



Fig. 24. The Jashlumbu temple in Shigatse, Tibet. (Photograph by Ping Xu, 1998)

space framed by mountain and water. The area for a pilgrimage in the holy mountains was organized with concerns of regional planning. Nevertheless, at every level, a marriage between architecture, landscape design and planning took place to produce the cultural landscape as a whole.

As in the mandala, in the temple the Buddha tower as a spiritual core is built in the center and is the highest point of the hierarchical space. The pattern of nesting spaces of a Buddha tower represents an order of encouraging people to seek the center. Closer to the center, more decorations appear, and more valuable architectural material is used: the higher the elevation, the more sacred the space becomes.

In the mandala model, the outer rim symbolizes the secular world. In Tibetan temples, main structures are surrounded by monastery courtyards. These monasteries, taking the shape of a vernacular courtyard, are usually clustered randomly on the slope of the land, creating a transition between the central architecture and the surrounding landscape, and also symbolizing a transition between the secular world and the sacred world. Farther apart from the temple's center, stupas placed at the entrance of the temple or village symbolically guard the gate, and stone landmarks indicate important turning points along the path toward the temple. Expanding into the natural landscape, these stupas and stone landmarks blur the boundary between architecture and landscape.

Landscape setting plays an important role in integrating the temple's architecture with landscape, addressing an analysis of scale from massive mountain ranges to a rock formation, and emphasizing the horizontal, spatial relationship between a temple site and its surrounding landscape. Borrowing and incorporating the view of the mountain summit, along with integrating the southern slope of the hill, and having a river in the front, the temple is viewed not in isolation, but as a whole, with the mountains behind: a literal Mount Meru in the Tibetan landscape.

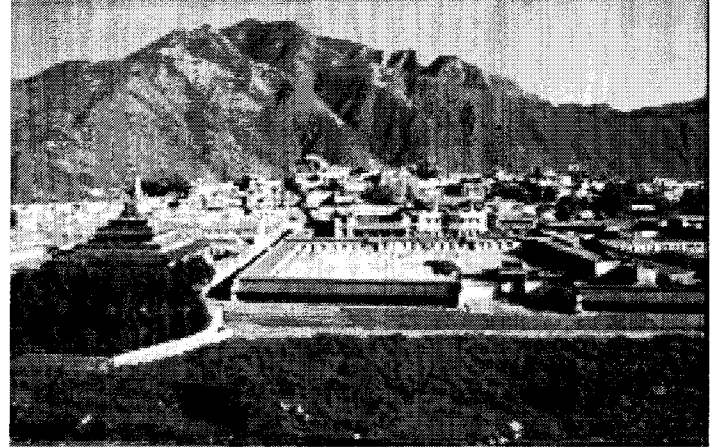


Fig. 25. The Labuleng Temple in Gansu Province. (Photograph by Ping Xu, 2002)

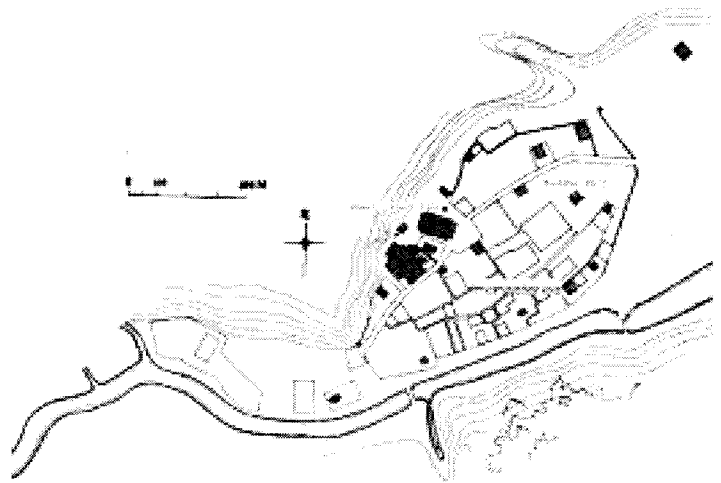


Fig. 26. The plan of Labuleng temple. (Source: Liu, 1984, P.374)

Tibetan Buddhist landscapes are shaped by using symbolic systems at multiple levels, from static construction design to dynamic ritual movements, and from the vastness of nature to the singularity of man. Man's activity is taken into account in the religious function of architecture and landscape. Circumambulation around a landmark, stupa, or temple progresses towards the center, as if walking through a mandala. When people circumambulate around these structures, the mandala model, a symmetrical diagram built up of nesting squares around with concentric circles, is eventually completed. The more times the circumambulation is completed and the higher elevation the circumambulation progresses through, the more purification is achieved, all the while using symbolism that integrates physical form with mental visualization. As a result, the mandala, a spiritual vehicle and symbol, ensures that the architecture reaches its original aim: the temple should be a place to translate, transmit, and transcend from the secular world to ultimate spiritual enlightenment.

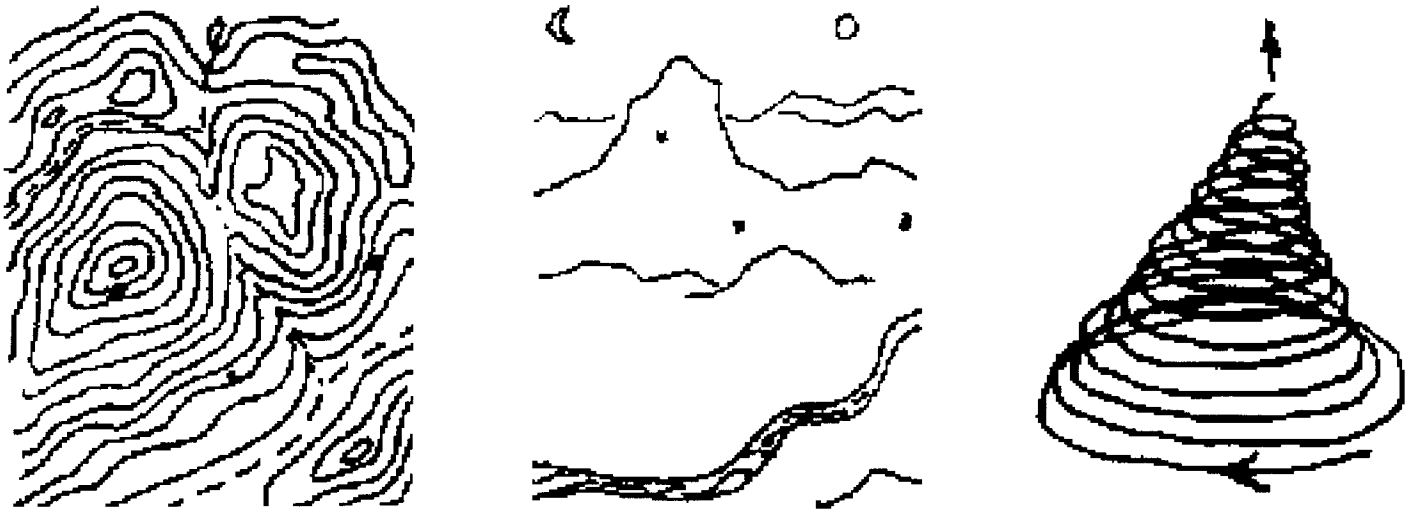


Fig. 27. The holy mountains and the path of a pilgrimage up the mountains. (By Ping Xu)

In the Tibetan cultural landscape, religious architecture and the landscape of mountains, water, vegetation and sky, are highly integrated. Architectural design and symbolism instill religious attributes in the landscape, and in turn, the landscape, serving as a matrix, imbues architecture with meanings of time and space. Insight into this integrative relationship between temple architecture and the cultural landscape would serve to protect the unique and sacred realm of Tibet, and enhance our understanding of the un-separated nature of architecture and landscape in general.

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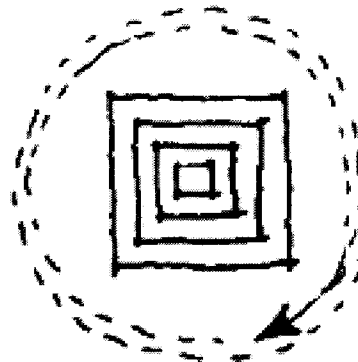
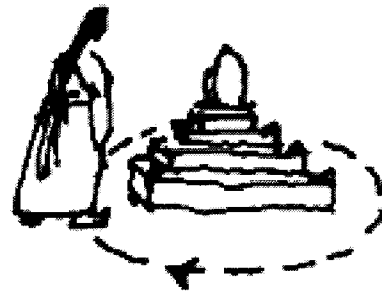


Fig. 28. Taking into account the tracks of circumambulations around structures, the mandala model is completed. (By Ping Xu)



Fig. 29. The circumambulation at the outer colonnade of the Labuleng Temple, Gansu Province. (Photography by Ping Xu, 2002)

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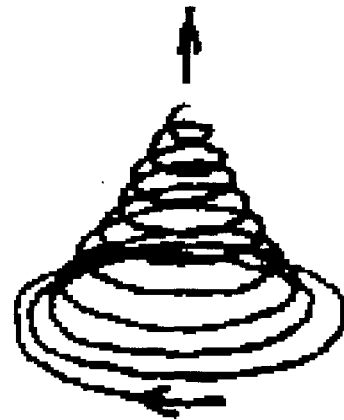
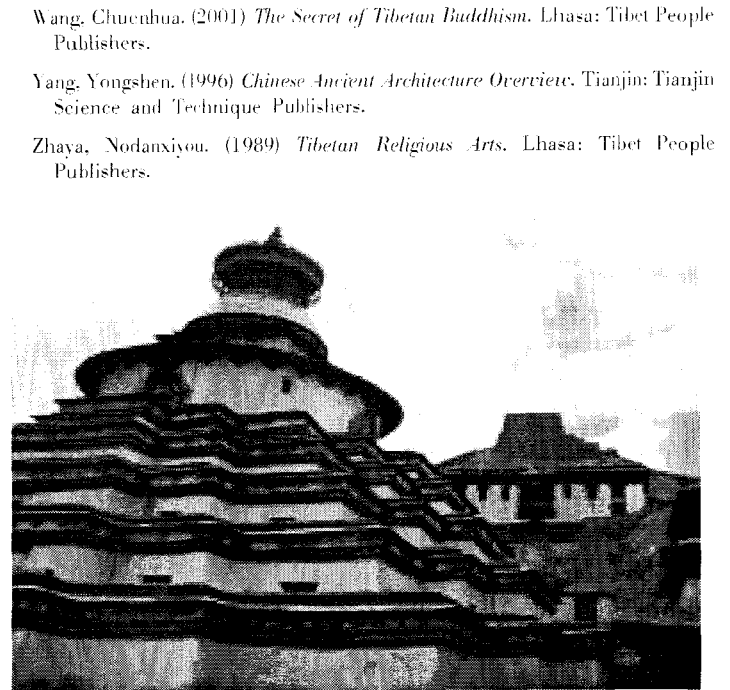


Fig. 30. The Baiju Temple was built in 1414 AD in Jiangzi, Tibet. (Photography and diagram by Ping Xu, 1998)

Mandala as a Cosmic Model Structured the Tibetan Buddhist Landscape

	Mandala as a Cosmic Model	Painting "Tan Cheng"	Landmark "Mani Dui"	Stupa	Buddha hall	Temple complex	Landscape setting	Holy mountains
Patterns of Spatial Organization in plan								
Man Moving in Mandala Space								

Fig. 31. Mandala as a cosmic model structured the Tibetan Buddhist landscape. (By Ping Xu)