

₹400.00 | ISSN 0975-0177

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2019-20

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JOURNAL OF LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE

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SUBSCRIPTION

1-YEAR [4 ISSUES] RS. 1,500.00 | 2-YEARS [8 ISSUES] RS. 3,000.00 |

3-YEARS [12 ISSUES] RS. 4,500.00

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JULEH!



JULEH!

A most commonly used greeting in Ladakh, juleh means hello. It is used to say good-bye as well.

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SMALL IS BEAUTIFUL

Last semester I took few classes on Ecology at University School of Planning and Architecture [USAP] with Geeta Wahi Dua who was my co-tutor. Various conversations with her touched upon many subjects but one topic was constant, my love for 'Ladakh'. Over a period of time, we decided to conceptualize a special issue on Ladakh region. Finally, it is here.

Out of sheer fascination for its landscapes and the natural beauty, I wanted to get there on my Royal Enfield bike as a young college student. That didn't happen. After few years, in 2016, I was invited by Nazir Din, an engineer with PWD to design a small old age home in Leh, so I got a chance to revisit the area. In Ladakh, the landscape changes with every turn. From the cold desert of Nubra to Tso Morori to the green pastures of Turtuk valley, the landscape showcases great diversity with different cultures of the region. It is a landlocked area and resources are very limited.

In the last few decades, the area has generated special interest in the minds of design professionals who have been studying Indian vernacular models of development. It is appropriate to note research documentation works of Romi Khosla, Anuradha Chaturvedi and very informative book, *Himalayan Cities* by Pratyush Shanker, not to forget works by INTACH, a premier institute working in heritage conservation. Eminent architects like Ram Sharma have designed some inspirational creations in the region. But the profession of architecture is unheard of on a larger scale. Most of the local people self-build or engage local contractors to make their homes.



PHOTO CREDIT: EMARA Architecture and Urbanism



In the recent decade, there is a surge of young practices, local and otherwise, who are trying to make a difference to the local conditions, primarily because of increasing tourism and their own love for the place. The special issue tries to bring to forefront these small initiatives.

Whosoever knows about development in Ladakh cannot miss the name — Helena Norberg-Hodge. Helena was one of the first Westerners to visit the region, accompanying a German film crew as a translator in 1975, when the Indian Government opened Ladakh to tourism and ‘development’. She kept returning to the region annually for few months across the next two decades. Over the years, she founded ‘Local Futures’, a non-profit organization dedicated to the revitalization of cultural and biological diversity, and the strengthening of local communities and economies worldwide. Women Alliance’ and ‘LEDEG’ are other two organizations doing incredible works. She continued living and working there for nearly two decades. She has very graciously shared her experience of living in Leh Ladakh in a special article, *On Development and Designing for Localized Future*, cautioning against uncontrolled urbanization in the region. Peeyush Sekhsaria reviews her fascinating book, *Ancient Futures*, and the movie. Rhea Shah in her article ‘Between Ages of Ice’ introduces extremely fragile region while showcasing its environmental history, at times interwoven with its culture. Amrita Slatch, in her article, *From a Trade Centre to a Tourist Destination* unravels new layers of the cultural history of the place as an important destination on the historic Silk Route, supported by some excellent archival photographs.

I have travelled extensively in and around Leh to explore the landscape of the region. The landscape changes with every turn, from cold desert of Nubra to Tso Moriri to green pastures of Turtuk valley, it also reflects different cultures of that region. I met Dr. Sonam Dawa, a senior horticulturist when I was studying about the native plants of Ladakh. In the issue he shares his work of establishing a nursery of natural plant species in the region. Few years ago, State initiated many programs to address the present issues related to public space, garbage disposal and sewage management in the growing town. Project *Tsangda*, conceptualized by Avny Lavasa [former CEO of Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council, LAHDC] shares her experience about challenges of in a remote region and power of local communities.

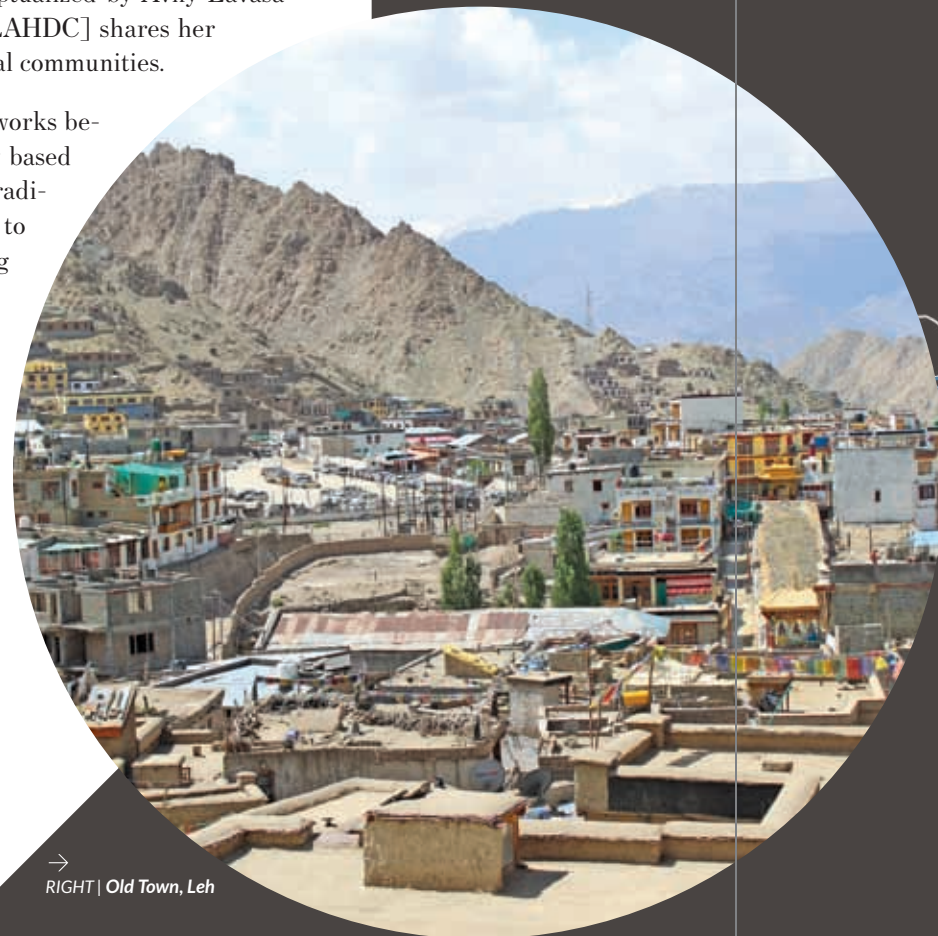
Despite rapid urbanization in the region, there are small inspiring works being conceptualized by young designers in the public domain, many based outside the region. Rigzin Lachic’s boutique hotel and Hatti, local traditional crafts bazaar; landscape designer Bérengère Guillon’s work to rejuvenate a small school courtyard with a different understanding of aesthetics; Priyamwada Singh’s proposal for a retreat; Rishav Paul’s intervention in Leh Main Bazaar for building public facilities and improvement of streetscape by Creative Footprints. are few of such endeavours that have been featured in the special issue. Documentation works, Heritage Walks, Exhibitions, Crafts Bazaars and Museums for tangible and intangible heritage are some of the other exciting works profiled here.

Recently designated as a Union Territory, I do hope that with the energy and positive outlook of the younger generation, Leh-Ladakh region treads the path of development with an informed and sensitive approach.



Hope you enjoy learning about the way of life and development in this unique cultural landscape.

All images courtesy the Author



→ RIGHT | Old Town, Leh

