

The Potala Palace in Tibet: The Interweaving of Architecture, Spirituality, and Culture

Dorinda Xiao¹ and Michael Shanks[#]

¹Menlo School, Atherton, CA, USA

[#]Advisor

ABSTRACT

The Potala Palace in Lhasa, Tibet is seen as a symbolic center of Buddhism. The specific architecture of the palace, such as the color palette and the rooms, is designed around Tibet's culture and religion, Buddhism. The architecture of the Potala Palace and the culture are interconnected as the color chosen for the palace relates with the history of Tibetan culture and the room designs relate closely to Buddhist practices. While culture has influenced the foundations of the Potala Palace's architecture, the palace itself also affects Tibetan society since Tibetans center around the economy it created, which they can profit from while also celebrating their traditions. This paper researches the interweaving of the Potala Palace's architecture, Buddhist spirituality, and Tibetan culture to gain a deeper understanding of the significance of the history and religion rooted in a traditional Tibetan building and how that building acts as a microcosm for Tibetan society today.

Introducing Potala Palace's design

How might one understand architecture? There are two approaches that historians typically use: looking at the structure of a building, or the society surrounding the building. However, after reading a paper where a researcher closely analyzed the people's experiences of architecture when walking through the Forbidden City, I was inspired to approach the study of architecture in a new way.¹ I concluded that the two typical ways historians use to study architecture could be combined, as architecture can be studied both by looking at its formal properties and the culture of the people around it. Therefore, this paper looks at how the architecture of the Potala Palace, located in Lhasa, Tibet, is interconnected with the culture of Tibetan Buddhism along with Tibetan people's experiences and lifestyles.

In 1950, the Communist Party of China invaded and seized Tibetan territory. The cessation banned the Dalai Lama, the Buddhist leader of the Potala Palace, from entering the territory of Tibet spanning to India², and many traditions of Tibetan Buddhism were discontinued throughout the palace. As a result, though the active practice of Buddhism is less prevalent in the palace than it once was, the history that it holds throughout the palace is unerasable. Therefore, Tibet's history of Buddhism and culture serve as fundamentals for how the Potala Palace exists today; this can be seen through the lasting impact of its correlation to the palace's architecture regarding color and room arrangement.

Tibetan Buddhist culture influences the architecture of the Potala Palace to a great extent through its connection with color and influence on interior design. The lifestyle and principles of the Tibetan monks who designed the palace were the foundation for the building. Once built, the palace continued to influence the experiences of the Tibetan people for whom the palace is a central feature in the city. Life is like a stage: the Potala Palace can be imagined

¹ Peng Liu (2018) Walking in the Forbidden City: embodied encounters in narrative geography, *Visual Studies*, 33:2, 144-160, DOI: 10.1080/1472586X.2018.1470477

² "Dalai Lama Begins Exile." *History.com*, A&E Television Networks, 21 July 2010, www.history.com/this-day-in-history/dalai-lama-begins-exile.

as a stage where the Tibetan monks act out their beliefs. Today, the palace remains a famous Buddhist symbol, but has evolved from only serving a religious purpose. The Potala Palace's architecture and history opened a new economic market for the Tibetan people: tourism.

Color is a key component of the architecture and design of the Potala Palace



Figure 1. The Potala Palace's outlook and structure

As seen in the photo, the Potala Palace's rich colors make it vibrantly stand out from the blue sky and white glacier mountains. Interestingly, the colors are just as meaningful as they are bright because they play a specific purpose. The main colors incorporated in the Potala Palace are white and red, as these colors have a connection to Tibetan culture.

The Potala Palace is split into two main palaces: the White Palace, seen as all the white buildings surrounding the center red building in the photo above, and the Red Palace, the building that stands out with its bright red color in the center of the image. The White Palace is seven stories tall and contains old Tibetan government offices, assembly halls, temples, courtyards, and the living quarters of the Dalai Lama. The White Palace is used mainly for religious ceremonies and government affairs.³ The Red Palace is nine stories and contains chambers for worshipping Buddha and constraints spiritual leaders' stupas.⁴

Throughout Tibet, white is painted mostly on the outer walls of houses, manors, and palaces. The light color serves a functional purpose as it can reflect UV rays which is helpful since Tibet has high UV radiation due to its elevation.⁵ However, while its architectural purpose plays a role in functionality, the color white's influence in Tibet's

³ UNESCO World Heritage. "Historic Ensemble of the Potala Palace, Lhasa." *UNESCO World Heritage Centre*, whc.unesco.org/en/list/707/.

⁴ UNESCO World Heritage. "Historic Ensemble of the Potala Palace, Lhasa." *UNESCO World Heritage Centre*, whc.unesco.org/en/list/707/.

⁵ Yu, Lan. (2020). The Interpretation of the Culture and Belief of Color in Tibetan Architecture. 10.2991/as-sehr.k.200923.014.

culture plays a bigger part in why it is so prevalent in the palace's design. In Tibetan Buddhism, white is known as the sutra "Xi," meaning gentleness, and correlates with the Buddhist god, Bodhisattva Guan Yin, the deity of mercy and compassion.⁶ Along with Tibetan Buddhism, the color white is also deeply rooted in Tibetan culture. There are three levels of life in Tibetan culture: heaven, earth, and underground; white represents heaven and the sky god.⁷ White is also a big part of the Tibetan people's environment and daily lives. White snowy mountains surround the palace, so people respect the color because they view those mountains as tall and powerful. Additionally, Tibetan people worship the "Three Whites," which are casein, milk, and ghee, because of the materials' prevalence in daily life. The color is even considered a symbol of kindness as Tibetans often use the color as an adjective for doing something good or empowering (i.e., a white deed or white saying).⁸ Overall, white is a highly valued color in Tibetan Buddhism and culture.

Red is another significant color in the palace's architecture, as seen in the center building of the photo. It is seen on the walls of important buildings in the palace, like the Guardian hall in the palace temple and halls containing stupa towers. One important factor the color plays in the buildings' functional design is that it absorbs heat in the winter and expels heat in the summer.⁹ Along with its importance in functional building design, red is also used throughout the palace due to its symbolism in Tibetan Buddhism. According to the "Huai" sutra, red represents authority and power; additionally, the Buddhist leader of the Sukhavati, Amitabha, is also red.¹⁰ Ironically, Buddhist monks wear red robes, not as a symbol of power, but because at the time of the robe-wearing tradition's formation, red dye was cheaper to purchase and the monks viewed it as an unnoticeable color that they could wear to show their devotion to spirituality rather than materialistic appearances.¹¹ Furthermore, red is valued in Tibetan culture because of the old legend that when ghosts from the underworld invaded, the Tibetan people's ancestors would paint red on their faces to scare them off. Although people no longer paint their faces red, the color continues to live on in the architecture of the Potala Palace.¹² Therefore, the red color used throughout the Potala Palace's architecture serves not only the functional purpose of absorbing and expelling heat, but representing the significant roots in Tibetan Buddhism and culture.

Although not as prevalent as white and red, yellow and black are also seen throughout the palace as they hold great traditional value. The color yellow is seen on the outer walls of temples to show high status because it is particularly symbolic in Buddhism. Yellow is known as the "Zeng" sutra in Tibetan Buddhism and symbolizes development, nobility, and authority.¹³ Buddhism also associates yellow with the Earth God Manjushri.¹⁴ Black is a color seen

⁶ Yu, Lan. (2020). The Interpretation of the Culture and Belief of Color in Tibetan Architecture. 10.2991/as-sehr.k.200923.014.

⁷ Yu, Lan. (2020). The Interpretation of the Culture and Belief of Color in Tibetan Architecture. 10.2991/as-sehr.k.200923.014.

⁸ Yu, Lan. (2020). The Interpretation of the Culture and Belief of Color in Tibetan Architecture. 10.2991/as-sehr.k.200923.014.

⁹ Yu, Lan. (2020). The Interpretation of the Culture and Belief of Color in Tibetan Architecture. 10.2991/as-sehr.k.200923.014.

¹⁰ Catherine. "Tibetan Buddhist Colors." *Seven Colors of Tibetan Buddhism, Color Symbolism in Tibet*, 25 Apr. 2021, www.greattibettour.com/tibetan-culture/tibetan-buddhism-colors.html.

¹¹ Catherine. "Tibetan Buddhist Colors." *Seven Colors of Tibetan Buddhism, Color Symbolism in Tibet*, 25 Apr. 2021, www.greattibettour.com/tibetan-culture/tibetan-buddhism-colors.html.

¹² Yu, Lan. (2020). The Interpretation of the Culture and Belief of Color in Tibetan Architecture. 10.2991/as-sehr.k.200923.014.

¹³ Yu, Lan. (2020). The Interpretation of the Culture and Belief of Color in Tibetan Architecture. 10.2991/as-sehr.k.200923.014.

¹⁴ Yu, Lan. (2020). The Interpretation of the Culture and Belief of Color in Tibetan Architecture. 10.2991/as-sehr.k.200923.014.

sparsely throughout the palace. The color is seen on the yak hair fabrics hung on the outer walls to trap heat, and the color is also used to paint entrances and exits like doors and windows. Black is known as the “Fu” sutra and represents the underground god.¹⁵ Buddhists view black as a guardian spirit from cruelty and evil, so that is why the color is chosen to paint the entrances and exits of buildings-- to offer extra spiritual protection.¹⁶

Exterior and interior design complements the culture and lifestyle of the monks

The Potala Palace interconnects with the culture and lifestyle of the Tibetan monks; this can be seen through the influence that Buddhist practices have on architecture. Tibetan monks are extremely devoted to their Buddhist practices, predominantly, the chanting of mantras and sutras, meditation, and mandalas.

The Buddhist practice of reciting mantras and sutras has impacted the architecture of the Potala Palace as they are the reason for the design of the Red Palace. A *mantra* is a word or sounds repeated during the process of meditation. On the other hand, a *sutra* is a written Buddhist scripture. Buddhist monks typically chant mantras and sutras not to reflect on the meaning behind words, but to have something to concentrate on.¹⁷ Within the religious design of the Red Palace, Buddhist monks chant these mantras and sutras. The Red Palace serves as a religious temple because it contains many sacred rooms filled with Buddhist scripture, paintings, and sculptures. Since the center of the palace is explicitly used for Buddhist practices and is painted a bright red to stand out amongst the other white buildings, the Buddhist practice of reciting mantras and sutras plays an important role in the design of the palace’s architecture.

Another Buddhist practice that has influenced the architecture of the palace is meditation. Meditation is commonly practiced in the Buddhist religion because it rids the mind of unnecessary thoughts, which allows the practitioner to find inner health and happiness. The Potala Palace is 3700 meters above ground level, located on Marpo Ri Hill. Its location makes it an ideal meditation environment because within Marpo Ri Hill, there are several meditation caves, including ones within the Red Palace.¹⁸ The first recorded use of the meditation caves in the Potala Palace was when Dharma King Songtsen Gampo meditated in a cave in the Red Palace during the 7th century.¹⁹ Through the design of the meditation caves, it is clear that the Buddhist practice of meditation has a great impact on the palace’s architecture.

Lastly, the practice of creating and destroying mandalas can be seen as a significant influence on the palace’s architecture, with its focus on spirituality rather than modern reality. Mandalas are a physical, artistic representation of the Buddhist monks’ belief in Samsara, the impermanence of the circle of life.²⁰ Mandalas are intricate designs that exist in five ways: sand, paint, three-dimension, visualization, or body.²¹ The construction process requires great concentration and takes weeks to finish; however, the monks end up destroying their finished designs to symbolize the

¹⁵ Yu, Lan. (2020). The Interpretation of the Culture and Belief of Color in Tibetan Architecture. 10.2991/as-sehr.k.200923.014.

¹⁶ Yu, Lan. (2020). The Interpretation of the Culture and Belief of Color in Tibetan Architecture. 10.2991/as-sehr.k.200923.014.

¹⁷ “Chanting the Sutras.” *The Pluralism Project*, pluralism.org/chanting-the-sutras.

¹⁸ “Potala Palace, Winter Palace of His Holiness Dalai Lama.” *Asian Art*, www.nepal-tibet-buddhas.com/tibet/potala-palace/.

¹⁹ Woaber, Tenzin. “Potala Palace.” *Nomadic Tibet*, www.nomadictibet.com/potala-palace/.

²⁰ Dundruk, Master Kungga. “Top Five Major Beliefs in Tibetan Buddhism.” *Tibet Travel and Tours - Tibet Vista*, 26 Nov. 2019, www.tibettravel.org/tibetan-buddhism/beliefs-in-tibetan-buddhism.html.

²¹ Blume, Nancy. “Exploring The Mandala.” *Asia Society*, asiasociety.org/exploring-mandala.

impermanence of the phenomenon and existence.²² This brief in Tibetan Buddhism can be seen throughout the Potala Palace's design as all the indoor furniture within the palace is removable to further the idea that nothing is permanent.²³



Figure 2. Sand Mandala

²² Blume, Nancy. "Exploring The Mandala." *Asia Society*, asiasociety.org/exploring-mandala.

²³ Blankenbehler, Benjamin. "Tibet's Sacred Architecture: The Potala Palace." *Architecture Revived*, 3 Apr. 2021, architecturerevived.com/tibets-sacred-architecture-the-potala-palace/.



Figure 3. 3D Mandala in Potala Palace

The Potala Palace proves to be a central influence in Tibetan culture and lifestyle

Tibet's culture, values, and religious practices have shaped the palace's architecture; however, the palace also influences Tibet's culture because of its central position in the lives of Tibetan people for more than 1000 years.

The Potala Palace, located in Lhasa, the capital of Tibet, remains the center of Tibetan civilization. In the centuries leading up to the palace's conquest by China's communist party, the Tibetan people revolved around it as it was the center of where they practiced Buddhism. Though it continues to be seen as an essential destination for Buddhism because of its rich history and continued efforts by select monks to maintain it, the palace is no longer explicitly used to practice Buddhism. Instead, the Potala Palace is now recognized as a symbol of Buddhism and a cultural attraction for people all over the world to travel to appreciate Buddhist culture. In addition, this increase in tourism has affected the lives of the Tibetan people because it has reinvigorated the local economy.



Figure 4. Tourism economy in Tibet

As seen in the picture above, many stores are set up in the street below the Potala Palace. Through the profit made in these stores, the Tibetan locals are able to make a living and sustain themselves. While seeking out economic opportunities through the tourism brought by the Potala Palace, the Tibetan people make the tourism process very specific in order to protect the Palace and ensure the core values of Buddhism that the palace holds. To even enter Tibet, visitors must obtain a Tibet Tourism Bureau permit from the local Tibetan travel agency. Then, when touring the Potala Palace, tourists must be with a tour group and are only permitted to be inside for one hour.²⁴ Also, they cannot document the trip with technology, and sacred rooms are closed off. Overall, the architecture of Potala Palace affects the Tibetan people and culture because it introduces a new economic benefit: tourism. With that, the Tibetan people work hard to preserve the history and value that the palace holds while still adapting to the modern benefits that it brings.

Architecture is a place, rather than just a designed space

Architecture is a key means of making space into place. Space is geometric, abstract, and neutral; part of geometry can be understood through the color along with the exterior and interior design of the Potala Palace. However, architecture is not just a space within which people pursue their lives and interests. It is a place, an active component of everyday life as it directly influences what people can do, how they feel, and what they believe. This can be seen through the new economic market that the architecture of the Potala Palace has brought along with its continued symbol of Buddhism that lives on today.

Therefore, the Potala Palace can be seen as a microcosm, an epitome of a larger unity,²⁵ in this case, Tibet, because it is an indication of how significant our environment is to those who live within it. The palace was built on

²⁴ Wei, Clarissa. "A Guide to Potala Palace, Lhasa." *Travel*, National Geographic, 4 May 2021, www.nationalgeographic.com/travel/article/tibet-autonomous-region-lhasa-potala-palace-world-heritage.

²⁵ "Microcosm." Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/microcosm>.

Tibetan culture and Buddhism, but now can be seen as a place where these fundamental beliefs are practiced and showcased through the new economic tourism market it has created. In society today, the Tibetan people and travelers from around the world revolve around the building because of its historical and religious significance.

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