5

MONUMENTAL STATEMENTS AND STREET PLANS

There never was a single Lhasa, though in the past there had been a shared language in the vocabulary of its construction. Today, as always, there are many Lhasas. But their languages are in conflict: the vernaculars of the city are multiple and mutually incoherent and its overall legibility has been impaired. About eight of these architectural languages can be easily discerned, as can, to some extent, the worldviews that inspired them.

The discordance of those languages became more apparent with the abrupt expansion of the city in the 1980s. In 1984, eight years after the death of Chairman Mao, it was announced that Beijing would invest in forty-three capital construction projects in Tibet. A series of grand buildings appeared on the outskirts of Lhasa, including the Lhasa Hotel, the Mass Art House, the People's Hospital, and a bus terminal. Tourism had been declared a principal part of the economy, and one year later the tide of new construction reached into the heart of the old town: the buildings on the western side of the Jokhang temple, not far from where the gates of Lhasa had stood when the British troops marched in, were demolished. Some say it was done against the wishes of the inhabitants

of the area, but there are no public records of local views at the time. The old houses in front of the temple were replaced by a pedestrian plaza surrounded by modern shops and with small, low-walled flower beds at its center. Known as the Barkor Square, it became the touristic heart of the city, and indeed of Tibet: it is where the buses and official sedans first line up to disgorge audiences arriving in Lhasa to admire the remnants of traditional Tibetan life and architecture.

The rest of the old town remained a densely packed warren of streets around the Barkor, focused on the selling of goods and acts of pilgrimage and circumambulation centered on the Jokhang. A few of the noble mansions like the Shatra remained intact, but since the 1960s almost all the traditional houses, now under government or absentee ownership, had been allowed to deteriorate to a condition where demolition had seemed to both the government and the occupants the only conceivable resolution. Each spring, after the New Year, a wave of destruction would recommence and another 40 or so of the 600 traditional buildings that had constituted Lhasa in the 1950s would be demolished.

The great houses of the nobility, each known by the family name of its former owners, had been the landmarks of these streets beyond the Barkor. The alleyways of the traditional area of Lhasa, now the Tibetan quarter, had threaded erratically between them and the smaller temples constructed in their midst. As the mansions fell into disrepair and the streets were widened, the former were no longer shaping forces in the city plan. Those that were renovated as offices, shops, or modern housing blocks lost the traces of their distinctive histories, and their names and memories became less prominent. In their place the dominant sites in the layout of the Tibetan quarter, besides the Jokhang at its center, were the remaining market areas, primarily the Barkor, still crowded with shops and street stalls, and the Tromsikhang, where in 1993 an orange-colored concrete building had been constructed with 1,800 stalls, the largest purpose-built shopping center in Tibet.

The frenzy of construction in the late 1980s marked the final enclosure of what had been the original city within the newly superimposed, expanding urban grid. Abruptly, after nearly forty years, the isolated settlements and clustered structures scattered across the valley floor had been connected and extended into an unbroken swathe of urban construction, within which the old city was a small, poetic counterpoint. The Norbulingka was no longer a park that lay beyond the fields and

woods surrounding Lhasa, which the Dalai Lama would cross when he sought to evade the summer heat. The open land that had separated the middle circuit of the Barkor from the outer circuit of the Lingkor, and the city from the Potala, had disappeared. All became part of a single conurbation that stretched for several miles beyond them.

By the late 1980s what was once the city of Lhasa had become the Tibetan quarter. No longer an entity in itself, it had become a fraction of the city that stretched on either side of it seamlessly from the western face of the Jokhang toward Tölung on the western outskirts, and from the mosque at the eastern edge of the quarter out toward Karma Gönsar on the road to Drak Yerpa. The city that even in the 1970s remained between the Barkor and the Lingkor, and then only in that area closest to the Jokhang, now lay between the Barkor and the outer ring formed by the great monasteries of Drepung and Sera. The conurbation reached the foot of the mountains on which the two monasteries stand. So far nothing else has been built on the mountain slopes, but wherever the marshes have been drained the valley floor is filling up.

We do not know what place this greater Lhasa has in the mind of the traditional Tibetan Buddhist, for whom the center of the city presumably remains the Jokhang. But we can guess that the Lhasa experienced by the Chinese administrator or the modern Tibetan businessman is ordered according to some different scheme. Perhaps its center is the Party headquarters in the former Shugtri Lingka, or perhaps it is the Friendship Store on People's Road; probably it depends on who these people are and where they work. But their ideas of the city are most likely organized by the concept that underlies the design of the new city's streets: the grid. Long thoroughfares, straight as Roman roads, running from east to west and from north to south, divide the buildings of New Lhasa. The two arteries of Beijing Lu and Jinzhu Lu, each some five miles or more in length, at their eastern extremities cut through the Tibetan quarter, so that it looks like a blot of ink dropped on the otherwise tidy map of the metropolis. The new city of Lhasa may, to the Chinese visitor or the modern businessman, appear—except for the inkblot of the Barkor—not unlike a square: ordered, precise, and regular.

The plan to reconstruct Lhasa along such lines formed slowly in the minds of the new Chinese rulers. Although entire quarters of cities in the Chinese hinterland were bulldozed to make way for parade grounds and factories, after their arrival in Tibet in 1951, the new administrators

proceeded slowly, avoiding grand gestures and careful not to overstretch their resources, which could only be imported with great difficulty since there was then no road connecting the two domains. In the first years after the suppression of the uprising in 1959, there was therefore little attempt at urban expansion in Lhasa; it was cheaper to move into existing houses bought during the early 1950s from noble families, who used the money to build new Tibetan-style houses for themselves in the suburbs, as had been fashionable for some twenty years. After the uprising, the new state appropriated the houses of those who had fled to India or been sent to prison and used them for offices and staff dormitories, often without any change to their appearance or much upkeep of their structure. There were not many outward signs of the new regime. The Communist Party had been more or less invisible in the 1950s, housed in the mansion of the Yuthok family, on the very edge of the original city beside what had once been the city gate; it had not proclaimed its presence at that time by erecting its own buildings. Only in the mid–1960s did it construct new headquarters in the Shugtri Lingka, the former park below the Potala Palace, just outside what was still then the boundary of the city.

The new administration did build temporary structures on the outskirts of the town, at some distance from the city; even in 1982 Henrich Harrer, returning to Lhasa as a tourist after thirty years, was struck by the maze of tin roofs on the new buildings he could see from the Potala. Many of the permanent dormitories and offices put up before the mid–1980s were also sited beyond the urban area; it was cheaper and more convenient to build around the traditional city rather than to rebuild it. Sewers, infrastructure, and roads could be put in easily in the former farmland, and with less risk of upsetting the inhabitants. These new settlements—office compounds called in Chinese *danwei* or governmental work units—seem to have been regarded as satellite conurbations, outside rather than part of Lhasa. They must have functioned in some way like a military cantonment in British India, a parallel town beside the indigenous city, with a separate life and character.

Now the garrison settlement and its clusters around Lhasa expanded to become the larger part of a new city. In 1988, when the Harvard-trained sociologist Ma Rong went to Lhasa, he was struck by the contrast between the new areas and the remnants of the historical city. For largely pragmatic reasons, and to save money, he wrote, “the main body

of the unit households [his term for the governmental work units] are located in the 'middle zone' between the old urban district and the suburbs." He described the result of this phenomenon:

> Three groups live in separate zones. Most of the unit households [the work units] consist of a large yard surrounded by walls or fences, and the majority of [government] employees and their families live and work within this area. Therefore they have limited chances (especially the Hans) to contact native Tibetans, who mainly live in the old urban district or in the suburbs. For this reason, the Han (who work in governmental units and live in the yard of their unit) are, to a certain extent, actually separated from native Tibetans in Lhasa. Construction materials and styles are different in the separate zones.... Because of these differences in their appearance, visitors to Lhasa can easily distinguish them.

For Ma, this was the opposite of healthy urban growth, and a cause of continued misunderstanding between the Tibetans and the Han. Indeed, it seems strange that a government committed to the unity of nationalities had constructed a city where after four decades the lines of ethnic cleavage were unmistakable even in the architecture. It was more or less by chance that the old town had not been demolished and rebuilt in the previous 40 years to enable a fuller commingling of the peoples, as Ma noted admiringly existed in Inner Mongolia, where, he pointed out, 81 percent of the population were Han by 1990. It was almost as if the *nāga*s and the ancient spirits had interfered with the dreams of Lhasa city builders yet again.

The buildings of the new Chinese city of Lhasa erected before the late 1980s were large, symmetrical, and regular; they were architectural statements of the solidity and purposiveness of the new regime. They were not magnificent or ceremonial, as were the grand constructions by European powers in their colonies. They were, in general, square, utilitarian blocks without decoration or adornment, each inside a square, walled compound of its own. The horizontal squares that were now marked by the grid of new streets on the city map thus existed in the vertical plane as well.

These new roads and buildings of the late 1970s and the early 1980s were named after the claimed achievements and aspirations of the Chinese state—the People's Cultural Palace, the Friendship Store, People's Street, Happiness Street, Beijing Street, Liberation Street, Education Street. In retrospect the choice of names appears unfortunate, for declaring their goals in stone and on signboards seems to imply some doubt about whether the Chinese authorities had achieved or could achieve them. This was not the first time that foreign rulers sought to make a statement by reshaping the streets of another nation's capital. In 1767, to take one case, fifty years after the annexation of Scotland, the Hanoverian kings of England began a building program on land to the north of Edinburgh. The elegant squares and townhouses of the new development were laid out in a series of grid-shaped rectangles and thoroughfares to one side of what is now called the Old City. Today that grid dominates the city and is its center and defining style. "The building of the new town contained many messages," writes one Scottish geographer:

> The urban form of straight lines and rectangular squares, a counterpoint to the organic density of the old town, was a solid metaphor for an enlightened society...a rational, ordered universe susceptible to human understanding and control.

Unlike the Chinese Communists, the Hanoverians did not use the new streets to recite their achievements or to repeat the sources of their authority. Instead they simply named them after the members and titles of their family: Frederick Street, Hanover Street, Queen Street, George Street, Princess Street, and Charlotte Square. But in other ways Lhasa's situation was not unlike that of Edinburgh. It was, for one thing, also the capital of a mountain territory with a strong and traditional religious culture scorned by the new rulers; it had also been annexed, through a claimed but disputed legal process, by a neighboring state. In both cases the new rulers belonged to an aspirant dynasty that had foreign, protestant, progressivist, and puritanical ideas. Both dynasties were capable of immense feats of organization, rapid technological advancement, and inordinate cruelty. Like the Chinese Communists, the Hanoverians, in the suppression of the Catholic Uprising of 1745, eventually waged a campaign of extreme savagery against opponents of the annexation. In

both cases, the rulers waited two or more decades after putting down rebellions before investing the large amounts of capital required to reconstruct the former capitals in a style that would communicate in stone the pacification and reordering of the alien city, along with the worldview of the new regime.

By the mid–1980s, as the Chinese economy began to benefit from the surge produced by the successes of liberalization, the first signs emerged that the new plans for Lhasa might go beyond the bleakness of Stalinist utilitarianism, the style that until 1984 had dominated new construction. It was announced that trees would be planted along the new thoroughfares, and in the official city plan of 1980 they were defined as one of the three criteria by which Lhasa could be recognized as a "modern socialist city":

> Lhasa must therefore be built up in a gradual and rational way conforming to the following criteria: well-structured, full of nationality characteristics, with lots of trees to provide a congenial environment and so on, to create a city that is relatively perfect, beneficial for production, convenient for daily life, rich, civilized and clean.

It was an attempt to convey, in those halcyon days of relative Chinese liberalism, a certain individualized and local character in the city design then being planned. Parks had once been, as we have seen, a dominant feature of traditional Lhasa, and to Chinese officialdom they probably suggested a divergence from the bleak, utilitarian era of Maoism that had just come to an end—they signaled the hope that central planning could encourage a leisure society and commercial achievement, as it had tried unsuccessfully to do through collective enterprise. The Chinese vision in the 1980s was not, however, of untrained or wild parks, as in the old Lhasa, but of ordered roadside greenery: what the planners had in mind was the tree-lined boulevard.

This was in itself a recrudescence. In 1905 one of the last *amban*s had given 1,000 *taels* of silver for workers to plant trees along the road from Lhasa to Gyantse, without effect since no plan had been made to care for the trees once they had been planted. In the 1950s, before the uprising and the flight of the Dalai Lama, when Beijing's policies toward central Tibet were still relatively relaxed, the Chinese authorities

had again encouraged the creation of such boulevards in Lhasa. The newly planted trees were among the first things Jamyang Sakya noticed when she returned to Lhasa in 1959, and that Tashi Tsering noted when he came back in 1966:

> A decade had passed since I left Lhasa for India, and a great deal had changed. As I initially looked around, I was struck by the many new houses, buildings, and roads. The size and scope of Lhasa had increased dramatically. I was particularly impressed with the many trees lining the highways, and thought this was a wonderful addition. However, I quickly learned that physical changes weren't the whole story.

It was not that the Lhasa aristocrats had ever been averse to the ordered arrangement of flowers or parks—indeed, many houses had had window boxes, which much impressed the British when they first arrived; forty years later, Heinrich Harrer too expressed his delight at seeing these flowers in the streets of Lhasa. The British had in turn been admired for the carefully cultivated flower and vegetable gardens of the British residency at Dekyi Lingka, "the Park of Happiness," just beside the Norbulingka. It was Hugh Richardson, the most famous of the British residents in Lhasa, who in the 1940s introduced geraniums to Tibet; they are still among the most popular houseplants in the Tibetan capital. Even before his time, the garden at Dekyi Lingka, had been turned by the British into a statement of Hanoverian elegance and grandeur in miniature: like the costume that the British diplomats wore for state ceremonies in Lhasa—a tight waistcoat and breeches, almost unchanged from eighteenth-century court dress, quite the opposite of the voluminous, loose-fitting robes of Tibetan dignitaries—it reflected the British sense of imperial refinement and of the control they exercised over nature. Perhaps the tree-lined avenues planned by the Chinese were intended to express similar ideas.

Great empires usually do more than simply replace the winding streets of their colonies with geometric avenues. At some point in their arc of confidence they seek to build great monuments to themselves and their philosophies. Trafalgar Square in London, the Champs-Elysées in Paris,

and Tiananmen Square in Beijing all reflect the celebration in the home capitals of imperial strength and confidence, expressed in the construction of linear, planned, large-scale, and repetitive statements in stone. Such statements were also made in the capitals of the colonies, creating sharp contrasts within cities that had until then grown organically, evolving over a long period for a multitude of functional and religious reasons into a form particular to the culture and place. In Delhi, for example, the vast network of spacious lawns and driveways created by Lutyens around the Lok Sabha sits awkwardly beside the anarchic alleyways of Chandni Chowk that cluster around the Jammu Masjid. One can imagine how in the colonial era such impositions must have been part of a deeply politicized and divided discourse.

That kind of architecture came to Lhasa on such a scale only in September 1995, when the authorities decided to mark in lavish style the granting of autonomy to the central Tibetan areas thirty years before. What they really must have wished to celebrate was the reemergence of the Chinese, and thus the Tibetan, economy after decades of socialist experimentation; perhaps they also recognized that after nearly seven years of almost constant protests in the streets, the energies of Tibetan dissidents were more or less exhausted. Sixty-two construction projects were announced as a sort of birthday present to the region. As in the previous such plan in 1984, these included hotels, government offices, power stations, and telecommunications links. "Their great importance lies in improving Tibet's backward infrastructure," wrote the officials. Not all the new investment was directed at improving the economy: two of the projects, which the officials did not mention in their publicity, were new headquarters buildings for the Party.

It was time to go back to Lhasa. It had been many years, I was only a few days' journey away, and I had not heard of any demonstrations in the Barkor or of armed police watching from the rooftops. I'd read that the People's Cultural Palace had become a disco, and that there were brothels all along the road outside the military camp. There was said to be a giant painted billboard of the Dutch soccer star Ruud Gullit, advertising Adidas shoes. And the Rambo bar, the shack that used to face the People's Park, had been replaced by a proper building that sold parts for Peugeot motorcars.

The hotels were better too, I'd heard, and so many taxis and private cars crowded the streets that there were traffic jams in Beijing Lu. Lots of big new

hotels and a leisure village beyond Tölung had gone up, together with an entertainment complex on Thieves' Island that was to include a casino.

I was a little worried that my name might appear on some official computer, but that was probably merely paranoia. Each hotel has a computer now, but they don't always work—a few months earlier the computer had failed at the Kyichu, the new hotel on Dekyi Shar Lam. That had led to the whole place being ordered to close for three months, because it had failed to register some visitors. Not that it mattered much to the locals, more concerned that the hotel didn't even have a decent discotheque. Actually, the employees had registered the visitors, but had not sent the information by modem to the foreign affairs police. That's what the computers are for, after all. It was bad luck that, unbeknown to the staff, one of the guests that week had been an American politician visiting incognito. So the hotel had been closed down as a punishment.

When I arrived at the border post at Dram-mo, the computers were not working there either. That suited me fine. The policeman checked my name in a big book to see if I was banned. The text was in Chinese, of course, but the banned names stood out in large, clear English letters. I could make out one name upside down, that of an English journalist I knew well who had made some films about Tibet. Alongside I could just make out a list of all her pseudonyms. I felt a twinge of jealousy. Then I remembered I felt relieved to be unknown.

The state hotel where I had stayed ten years earlier looked even dowdier than before. The roads were far worse, so that everyone had to jump from stone to stone to avoid the mud. But the signs of urban renewal were also there: the small shops, many of them operated by Tibetans, the lavish archway saying WELCOME TO THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC *under construction at the entrance to town, and the satellite dishes on the rooftops.*

In the doorway of a Chinese teashop, a farmer from the hills stood in a ragged chupa, *watching images on the television screen, till he was shooed away by the owner's family. There was a megaphone on the roof, and the soundtrack from the film reverberated through the town in a language that neither the farmer nor I could understand, but that he and his fellow farmers could hear on mountain slopes far across the valley anyway.*

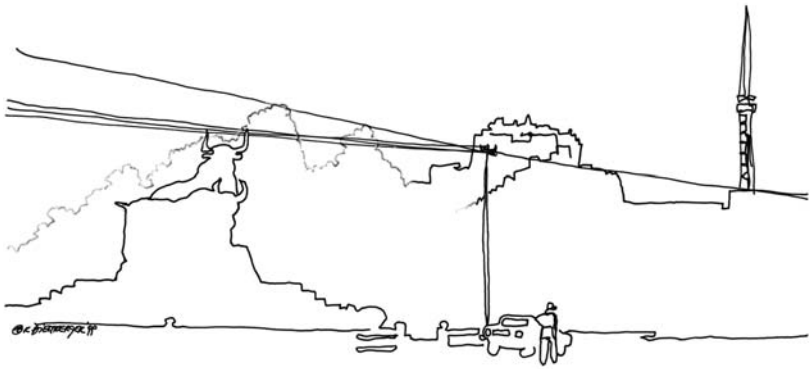
On the wall of the teashop was a color photograph of a boa constrictor draped around the private parts of a naked Western woman. "Natassia Kinski and the Serpent" said the caption, printed in bold letters below her body. The photographer's name appeared in bold, publicity-minded lettering across

the bottom of the poster: Richard Avedon. Sweet irony: Avedon's son was famous in the West as the author of the first popular history criticizing China's policies in Tibet.

On the other wall was a drawing of an unsmiling policeman, saluting as he looked out from the notice board. The captions were written beside him in all three languages, Chinese, Tibetan, English: "Police Advice," it said, "Keep the National Unity Consciously."

By the beginning of September 1995 the construction teams, acting on orders from leaders in Beijing, had created at the foot of the Potala a vast military parade ground called the New Potala Palace Square, with a flagpole at its center and an ornamental fountain on the backs of Chinese dragons carved out of stone. It was a space of magnificent redundancy, regarded widely as a sort of replica of Tiananmen Square in the national capital. Both are designed to host lavish ceremonies, parades, and mass meetings, events where the message is imparted not by the speeches but by the number of people present in one place, arranged in unbroken lines and facing in one direction. Previously such assemblies had been held in the People's Sports Stadium, which its audiences must have often noticed was not primarily designed for the political meetings or sentencing rallies they attended there. Lhasa was thus given a formal space in which grand statements could be delivered by its rulers in the appropriate manner.

The design of urban spaces is more than an exercise in architectural aesthetics. It is the silent sending of a set of messages, the meaning of which emerges when, like all hypotheses, they are tested by their opposites. Some of the villagers of Shöl, the last significant section of traditional Tibetan housing outside the Barkor area, whose homes had to be demolished to make way for the square, were a manageable antithesis; they were given compensation and moved to the north side of the city. In August 1999 a part-time builder called Tashi Tsering produced the meaning of the square by offering an explicit contradiction: he climbed the flagpole at its center and pulled down the Chinese flag. He took his own life in prison six months later. His friend who ran the orphanage near Lhalu where he sometimes worked was given a life sentence. The orphanage director's wife received a ten-year sentence; the cook, the accountant, the math teacher, and the children's nannies spent one, two, or three years in prison after the flagpole incident. The reasons for these



detentions are obscure, except that they were some form of collective punishment for the gesture the part-time builder had made in the New Potala Palace Square.

The square generated other kinds of stories that tell its meanings through what it does not tolerate. These are of a whispered, lighter kind. Like Romans in World War II Italy who changed the name of the Vittorio Emmanuele II monument to the Wedding Cake, Tibetans renamed their local replica of Tiananmen: in teahouses and in bars they called it the Kalachakra Square, because it provides enough space for Tibetans to gather in thousands when the ceremony of that name is next performed. This is probably not the purpose that the design team were told to think of when they planned the square, because in modern times only the Dalai Lama performs the Kalachakra. So the new square will not be likely to justify its second name in the lifetime of the current Chinese system.

Across the city other, smaller statements were made in the monumental style, and other murmured stories hovered around them, pecking at their official meanings. The Golden Yaks, a giant statue of two such beasts painted gold, was erected by the city's leaders at a crossroads just beyond the western end of the Potala Square, part of a series of new, gargantuan sculptures in rock or gold placed at city junctions. THE TREASURE OF THE PLATEAU, reads the inscription at its base. It seems to have been intended, like many efforts at civic activity in Tibet, to counter the prominence of religion in the organization of the calendar and the city by reminding Tibetans of the material basis of their pros-

perity. Some Lhasans, however, viewed the two yaks differently: as statues of the two most prominent Tibetans in the Vichy government. The pair are credited with an imaginary conversation that, as is usual in Tibetan political humor, mocks Tibetans for their credulity. One yak is Pasang, the highest Tibetan woman in the Communist Party in Tibet, looking upward and saying that things are horrible and the sky is going to fall on her head. The other yak is Ragti, the highest Tibetan male in the Party: he is telling Pasang, "It doesn't matter, we can increase the price of fuel yet again."

Within a year or so, the popular account of the two yaks' conversation changed. The humor became more bleak and self-deprecating, as if recalling the medieval stories told of Minister mGar's reception at the court of the Chinese emperor in the seventh century. Ragti, looking ahead along Beijing Road toward the new Potala Square and beyond it to the Chinese capital, is asking Pasang if the Tibetan masses are still following behind. She is looking back along the road leading west and replying, "Yes, the masses are still with us."

In a later version, the yak Ragti tells Pasang not to worry about the masses, because Beijing is anyway sending trucks with more and better beer.

The meaning is clear enough: Tibetan leaders are domesticated beasts, and, much like them, the Tibetan people can be relied upon to accept whatever their rulers demand or offer. But, these street tales also seem to say, just like mGar a millennium before, Tibetans also can predict what the next demands or offers are going to be.