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FROM CONCRETE TO BLUE GLASS

Architecturally the New Potala Palace Square, as Lhasa's version of Tiananmen is called officially, is a prominent but not entirely typical feature of the city's landscape. It is a gesture of bravura in concrete intended to exude confidence and conviction, made just one year after the collapse of Washington's threat to impose trade restrictions on China for its human rights abuses, at a time when China had exposed such threats from the West as effectively empty bluster. This air of confidence was a new phenomenon, however, and it was rapidly superseded by another mode of architectural self-assertion that soon replaced the monumental style: the use of glass and chrome to offset concrete structures.

Concrete. During the decades following the arrival of the Chinese army, the main form of industrial production had been cement; even the minor construction before the 1980s could not have taken place without the factories that produced it. Though glorified in publicity brochures produced by the state at the time they were built, they were an ugly addition to the city. Tibetans who worked in those factories during the Cultural Revolution are said to be dying now from cancers initiated by the dust clouds that still hang over their precincts. Walking to Sera monastery one day in 2001 by a little-known back route leading from

Dode across the foot of the mountains, just below the sky burial site, I discovered why locals rarely use that mile-long path: the prevailing breeze carries the dust from the smokestacks of one of the city's cement factories and deposits piles of fine, white powder across acres of largely unused and abandoned land just below the mountains and the famous monastery for as far as one can see. Long before I had reached Sera, every part of my body and my clothes was coated in white residue. Only garbage pickers and the destitute lived there, searching for resaleable items in what had become a vast, polluted city dump.

Building primarily in cement offered the advantage that fewer trees would need to be cut down in Tibet. This rationale was largely theoretical, because the Tibetan forests were anyway then being cleared to supply the market for timber in inland China. But these factories had symbolic resonance for the leaders in Tibet because almost no other large-scale industries had appeared in the region since the Chinese authorities had arrived. For many of those years, China was in Stalinist mode and committed to heavy industry as the key to its development, but cement remained probably the only significant industrial product in Tibet. In the year 2000 the government planned to produce nearly half a million tons of cement annually from its plants in Tibet, a quarter of it from Lhasa. Until the railway from China reaches Lhasa in 2006 and the roads are sufficiently improved to allow mines to operate profitably, construction is likely to remain Tibet's major form of heavy industry.

In the late 1990s concrete, which had built the countless dormitory blocks and government offices of the 1970s, the 43 projects of 1984, the 62 projects of 1994, and the New Potala Square, was abruptly displaced as the visible hallmark of urban construction: modernist architecture hit Lhasa. All over the city, buildings were erected with glass fronts and pyramidal shapes, towers, steel frames, and asymmetrical contours. The vertical rectangle had become outmoded, and geometric form had arrived. With it came multistory blocks and aesthetic flourishes, rhomboid roofs and triangulated profiles, individualism and architectural boldness. It was a leap in style, a quantum shift rather than an evolution, from the unindividuated character of the centrally planned city construction of the earlier era, though it too emanated from plans concocted in the Chinese capital. The 1980 urban schema, with its instructions for Lhasa to remain a city "full of nationality characteristics,"

slipped into the past and became for a while a footnote as the planners reveled in modernist experiment.

The new style was in effect an architectural hymn of praise to Deng Xiaoping, then the paramount leader of the People's Republic, after he came out of retirement in 1992 to make an excursion to the southeast coast of China, where its greatest cities were experimenting with more or less unfettered capitalism. The trip had been widely publicized in the official Chinese press as a signal of Deng's approval for high-speed marketization of the economy, and it was made clear that this should be pursued in every region of China. In practice the reform meant that what officials termed "nonpublic" businesses were to be promoted at any cost, and, less prominently, that the state would no longer guarantee the funding of education, health services, and social welfare. The drive to implement these reforms was called the Spring Tide, because it was intended to sweep across the country, including the western, "backward" areas.

In Lhasa, certain Tibetan leaders in the Party waged a fierce and unsuccessful battle against some aspects of the reforms. It was not that they objected to the market economy or that they retained any nostalgia for socialist economics, a notion that had long since faded from the Chinese and Tibetan political landscapes. But those within the upper reaches of the Party must have realized that in Tibet these reforms were being promoted by local Chinese leaders with different aims in mind: ending preferential economic and policy concessions for Tibetans, stalling the discussion of Tibetan-centered development, and promoting further Chinese migration to the area.

The moderates' attempt to resist the Spring Tide failed, and Deng's drive for instant marketization brought immediate and visible results to Lhasa, the consequence not of organic shifts but of central policy mandates. In April 1992 every government department was instructed to convert the ground-floor frontage of any property it owned on a main road into spaces that could be rented out as shops. These became the box-shaped, one-room shops that then proliferated on all the main streets of Lhasa, leased to a new breed of petty entrepreneurs, most of whom appeared to be Chinese. During 1993, 5,300 "individually run enterprises" were set up in Lhasa; 15 years earlier there had been 489 in the whole of the Tibet Autonomous Region. Wherever possible, new purpose-built premises were erected to house markets and department

stores. The new concrete-block market building in the Tromsikhang was one of 23 constructed in Tibet that year as the Spring Tide swept across the country.

This, the architecture of petty commerce, was the first wave of the tide. Its face was unremarkable: small garagelike shops along every major thoroughfare, festooned with loud signs, or featureless rectangular market halls. The new buildings had, at least along more important streets, one aesthetic embellishment: the concrete frontages were usually clad with large white tiles that for Western visitors made the streets look like the interior of a giant toilet or a bathroom. The second wave came about a year later, as the market reforms began to attract serious investment. The style changed from small bars and cigarette stalls in boxlike buildings to large stores and hotels housed in blocks designed according to the principles of new Chinese modernism, featuring giant panes of blue glass, sweeping diagonals, and geometric designs. The Shanghai waterfront had arrived in Tibet with unexpected rapidity.

The food stores in Dram-mo had another new addition: phone booths. They were wooden cubicles installed at the shopkeeper's expense on the street beside the shop front, with a little bench on which to sit while you made your call. I discovered something had really changed: now you could telephone Europe directly. Telecommunications had reached this town even before the road was finished.

I had been back in Tibet about two hours by then, and I started to relax. The man who owned the phone booth sat beside me while I made my call; he wanted to practice his English. He had only a few words; one of them was "Dharamsala," the town in India where the Dalai Lama lived. I said I had heard of it. He registered no reaction. Business was all right, he said; the taxes were high but not too bad. He had come from the east with his brother to start a small boarding house. Then he dropped another phrase into the conversation, almost inconsequentially: "Dalai Lama."

I said yes, I knew of him; he seemed to be a good person, I said, keen to change the subject. He said he knew that the Dalai Lama had visited Taiwan earlier that year. We had been talking for maybe four minutes by then, and I was getting slightly nervous. I asked if it was all right for him to talk with me. He said yes, he could practice his English, as long as we did not speak—he switched back to Tibetan to say this—about politics. I relaxed. That seemed

okay; I didn't want to talk about politics either. We didn't mention the Dalai Lama again, we talked about business instead.

I pulled out a pencil and a piece of paper to explain some question about how much a phone call costs. By then seven or eight minutes had passed. Then I saw the face of the phone man change: he was looking over my shoulder. I heard the torrent of Chinese from behind me. It was a younger man in an anorak, looking angry. Something was wrong, and it was evidently me. "You have to go away immediately," said the man who owned the phone.

I tried to leave unhurriedly, so as not to incriminate him further. I could not understand what the man in the anorak was saying, but it was clear that we should not have talked. There was no sign that the phone man was going to be taken away; this looked more like a public warning. After all, I told myself, it was only ten minutes, including my time on the phone. But I knew the encounter would go in his file—everyone in China has a file. I had seen some of them once, ten years before, the morning after they burned down the police station in the Barkor. People had whooped with joy as they found their files, waved them in the air, and then destroyed them in the embers of the building.

Maybe the pencil and paper had been the signal that attracted the plainclothes policeman, Party official, state security man, or man from the neighborhood committee—whichever one he was. But it was more likely something simpler: in Tibet it doesn't matter if you talk about politics, it matters if you look like you might be talking about politics.

A very basic error. I had only planned to be in town a few hours anyway, but it was better to leave immediately. Here where I had no history, and where the computers weren't plugged in, within three hours I had already gotten someone into trouble. Staying in Lhasa was out of the question.

It could not have been coincidence, this abrupt arrival of a style: something had changed to make it possible, and that something was cash. All the inland Chinese provinces had been instructed by the central authorities to spend large sums of money on new construction in Tibet, and major roads and shopping malls, often named after the places that had funded them, were appearing in Tibetan towns. Those provinces, eager to show their munificence toward their fellow citizens in the poorer parts of China, had also brought in their own architects to design the monuments to their donations, and thus had exported their eastern Chinese styles to those areas without recourse to early 1980s notions that had recognized some value in indigenous aesthetics.

Smaller entrepreneurs also received a boost from the new policies. The central government had apparently instructed banks to lend to businessmen who were interested in building larger commercial premises. Interest rates were set artificially low, and the entrepreneurs were, it is said, allowed or encouraged to speculate on the stock market with the cash during the planning stage of their project. This meant that more money could be made by investing in the Hong Kong stock exchange than by relying on the new venture, once it was completed, to generate income. The success of the venture thus became secondary to the speculation with the cash. The bigger the construction project, the greater the loan that could be sought and the profits that could be made trading stocks.

Under such conditions, by 1994 the most prolific kind of commercial project in Lhasa, and throughout Tibet, was the one that required the lowest operating costs but the highest startup funding. The answer appeared in neon lights along the streets of every town in the region: the karaoke bar and its relatives. Lhasa became a city of bars, nightclubs, and 24-hour hair salons of dubious purpose. In 1998 one Tibetan exile reported that on a return visit he had counted 238 dance halls or karaoke bars and 658 places that he deemed brothels along 18 of the main streets of the capital. The People's Cultural Palace, on the southern edge of what is now the Potala Square, was rechristened JJ's after the New York discotheque, and soon nightclubs with names like the Sunlight, the Dynasty, and Sun City were appearing in the new modernist style of architecture, bringing the total in the city to about 30. In August 1996 the official Party newspaper in Tibet published a letter from an unnamed reader:

> Comrade Editor:
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> On a recent stroll through the streets of Lhasa, this writer discovered that the shop signs of several stores, restaurants, and karaoke dance halls showed extremely poor taste. Their display is strongly colored by feudal superstitions, low and vulgar, of mean style, with some even making indiscriminate use of foreign names. For example, "Rich and Powerful," "Imperial King," "Little Sister Awaits You," "Keep You Here at Night," "Cute Babes," "Forget Me Not," and so on. There are some that quite simply take New York and London and "move them in" to Lhasa.

The letter writer went on to demand that the authorities "purify Lhasa's bad cultural appearance." But if the names above these premises changed, the construction did not. On Gumalingka or Thieves' Island, formerly the favored summer picnic ground of Lhasa Tibetans, an entertainment complex of neon-fronted bars and restaurants, planned to include a multistory hotel and to cover a square mile, was initiated by a Macao consortium in partnership with the Lhasa government. Beside the Potala the first seven-story building in the city center sprang up, a new telecommunications headquarters with sweeping curves and a blue glass front whose towers rival the palace on its hilltop. In less than four years after the completion of the New Potala Square, the Chinese state had found a new vocabulary to express its grand designs and ideas of power in the region. Glass and metallic office blocks, the language of modernity, entertainment, and wealth, had extended the limited lexicon of monumental parade grounds.

By 1997 the city of Lhasa covered 20 square miles, 17 times its area when the Chinese had arrived. The Tibetan quarter was down to about half its original size, and was shrinking fast. The central authorities, who had declared tourism one of Tibet's five "pillar industries" and had successfully petitioned UNESCO to include the Potala on its list of World Heritage sites (after the giant square had been completed), compensated for the new dominance of modern architecture by reinforcing rules from the early 1980s that restricted construction work in areas adjacent to a "national relic." Buildings in such locations could still be demolished without much difficulty, but new construction had to be in a style that blended with the monument. In Tibet these rules were applied to the area around the Jokhang, where, besides the temples and the handful of secular buildings protected as state monuments, about 150 of the old buildings were still standing by the turn of the millennium, many of them small and undistinguished, desperately in need of reconstruction or repair. The rapid demolition of the old houses around the Barkor could continue, but their replacements had to be aesthetically in keeping with the temple.

This led to the development of the hybrid or "New Tibetan" style, in which buildings in touristic areas of Lhasa began to be constructed. The street frontages of houses in this style look to the untrained eye somewhat similar to the buildings they replaced: window frames picked out

in black, blue-and-white striped awnings shielding the windows, stone block-like exteriors, and lightly corniced tops along a flat roof. But the structural details of Tibetan architecture are missing: the walls do not taper and do not have cavity insulation, the windows are rectangular and too large, the interior pillars are gone, and the main construction material is concrete. The exterior is cosmetic: the new Tibetan style is thus a concrete utilitarian dormitory block with a decorative façade.

The problem with these buildings was not so much aesthetic as practical. They looked muted and, to tourists, they seemed somewhat in character. But they suffered from the same defects as the dormitory blocks in the other parts of the town: their design was unsuited to the climate, damp in winter, too hot in summer. In the old buildings earth bricks in double rows had provided insulation against the cold and retained warmth; the low, timber-framed ceilings and smaller windows had also kept in heat. These qualities were lost in the switch to concrete, single-layer walls. Similarly, the protection offered against collapse in the event of earthquakes by the heavy, tapering walls of the old style cannot be matched by concrete blocks perched on thin cross-beams. The new buildings also lacked provision for any improvement in the supply of water or power to match the increase in the density of occupants, so that by 1997, still only 70 percent of the inhabitants of Lhasa had access to tap water. An attempt in 1992 to construct a sewage system in the Tibetan quarter had failed, but not before the city authorities had destroyed many of the city toilets built in the traditional twin-drop system used for generations in Tibetan settlements, replacing them with public toilets painted in lurid white and orange with a single drop system that never dries out and thus remains unsanitary. Late in the twentieth century the Tibetan quarter of Lhasa was thus a confusion of religiosity, decaying mansions, feverish construction, half-planned amenities, and demolition sites as it faced the onward rush of rapid modernization.

I walked back to the border, slowly, so as not to attract attention. I bought two Thermos bottles, some plastic toys, and small gifts from some Tibetan stall holders, haggling briefly for effect to make my impossibly short visit look plausible. By the time I reached the border post, it was closed at what seemed to me the middle of the afternoon: I had forgotten that the police, like all officials in Tibet, operated on Beijing time, set 2,000 km to the east, while the

town, like neighboring Nepal, ran according to the sun, two and a quarter hours behind.

The police chief was Tibetan. He lay on a bed in his vest and trousers. He was busy cracking melon seeds and watching a film on television. Faded pictures of barely clad women had been torn from newspapers and stuck up on the wall beside the compulsory picture calendar. Three Chinese youths in uniforms sat on the other bed, watching the chief cracking melon seeds and watching the film on television. He didn't look at me. I asked if I could be allowed to pass through the border post en route to Nepal even though I was late and the post had officially just closed. He motioned me to a stool: I was to sit down. I knew I had a chance.

From somewhere in my memory I retrieved the laws of face: he could not easily make a concession, especially to a foreigner; it would be a sign of weakness. My best hope was to let him humiliate me. It had to be just a little, enough to impress the subordinates on the other bed but not so much as to make me of insufficient rank to merit the concession. I began to plead my case, slowly, without raising my voice. I tried not to become plaintive or exhibit desperation.

It took only twenty minutes to complete the ritual. Then, without a word or a glance to me, a man appeared with a suitcase. He laid it on the chief's bed, among the discarded casings of the melon seeds, got out his official paraphernalia, stamped my passport, and waved me through.

I was past the main checkpoint, but I had not yet left Chinese territory: there was a final police post at the Friendship Bridge, perhaps a thousand feet below. I began to walk down the winding mountain road. It was dark, very dark, and the walk would take two hours, unless I tried the short cuts. Last time I had met a Nepali smuggling a ghetto blaster across the border who had shown me the paths across the cliff face that cut off the corners of the winding road. This time I didn't dare take the short cuts in case I slipped. There was no moon, it was pitch black, and I wasn't as fit as I had been before.

Guard dogs howled as I passed the little barracks halfway between the border town and the bridge. I had read about this place: it's where Tibetans are held when they are caught trying to cross back into Tibet after going to study secretly in schools in Dharamsala, or after traveling illegally as pilgrims to see the Dalai Lama. There's a room with nothing in it except a barred window, and at night they are chained one to another in a line, the last one chained to the window bars so that only the people at the end of the line can lie down. The others sleep standing up.

I picked up stones from the untarred road in case the dogs were loose. Otherwise, there was nothing for me to fear. I was a foreigner, and the police never touch foreigners in China.

It was nearly an hour before I saw a vehicle on the road, a jeep. I couldn't expect a lift, because it was coming the wrong way, climbing up the mountain toward me. I saw it leave the police post on the Chinese side of the river far below and start to negotiate the rutted track toward the border town I had just left. I could see the beam of its headlights below me as it made the slow climb up from the bridge.

When it reached me I could see only the headlights, blinding me as the jeep approached; I moved to the outside edge of the road to let it past. I knew that in the dark I would look just like any local on his way to sell cheap Thermoses in the Nepali market across the border next morning. I swung my arms more widely from my body so the bottles I carried would show clearly in silhouette.

The jeep drove straight toward me, the headlights rushing directly into my face. Maybe I lifted up my hands and the Thermoses to shield my eyes; maybe that was why they did not see me clearly. I backed off rapidly to the side. The headlights swung toward me again. Again I moved sideways. Again the lights followed me. I had nowhere else to go; behind me the road curved abruptly, leaving a cliff edge to the side. To my right, six inches away, was a vertical drop of perhaps 100 or 200 feet. I moved onto the last inches of solid ground.

At the final moment the jeep swerved to avoid me and screeched to a halt; it had, of course, all been a little late-night entertainment for the occupants. A policeman rolled down the window, began to shout abuse in Chinese, and then realized I was a tourist. The reaction was stranger than the abuse: the policeman shouted at his driver and the jeep roared away as fast as possible into the night. It was as though a group of children had been caught misbehaving.

Standing in the pitch black of the mountainside, I tried to collect my thoughts. In the glare of the headlights, alone in the no-man's land at night, they had thought I was Tibetan or Nepali.

I hurried onward with my Thermos bottles toward the bridge below, and, beyond the bridge, Nepal. And Kathmandu, and an airplane back to London.

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