

**Identification**

<i>Nomination</i>	The Potala Palace, Lhasa
<i>Location</i>	Tibetan Autonomous Region
<i>State Party</i>	People's Republic of China
<i>Date</i>	26 October 1993

**Justification by State Party**

As "a pearl on the roof of the world", the Potala Palace embodies the outstanding skills of the Tibetan, Han, Mongol, Man, and other nationalities and the high achievements of Tibetan architecture in terms of the overall layout of the Palace as well as its civil engineering, its metalwork, its sculptures, and its wall paintings. For this reason it is worthy of inclusion on the World Heritage List.

The Potala Palace consists of the White Palace and the Red Palace, with their ancillary buildings. They were built at different periods, but they are well integrated with one another owing to the way in which they are sited on the side of a mountain. The result is an exceptional aesthetic achievement and a masterpiece of architectural creation (criterion i).

The high quality of the Potala Palace lies not only in its overall architecture but also in the design and artistic decoration (sculpture, paintings) of its component features (criterion ii).

The Potala Palace is noteworthy for its architecture, which integrates that of temples with that of palaces. In this respect it is rare not only in China but also throughout the world (criterion iv).

As the former centre of government in Tibet, combining political and religious elements, the Potala Palace is closely connected with the important figures in the history of Tibet, such as Songtsen Gampo, Princess Wencheng, Princess Tritsun (Bhrikuti), and the Dalai Lama of each generation. The Palace is therefore of great historical, ideological, and religious significance.

**History and Description***History*

[Note In this evaluation ICOMOS has adopted the generally accepted phonetic versions of Tibetan proper and place names]

According to historical records, construction of the Potala Palace began in the time of Songtsen Gampo of the Thubet or Tubo dynasty in the 7th century AD. It was rebuilt in the mid 17th century by the 5th Dalai Lama. It reached its present size and form in the years that followed, as a result of repeated renovation and expansion.

Songtsen Gampo (reigned c. 609-649) played a very important role in the political, economic, and cultural development of Tibet; he also encouraged close links with central China. He united Tibet and, for political and military reasons, moved the capital from Lalong to Lhasa, where he built a palace on the Red Mountain in the centre of the city. He married Princess Tritsun (Bhrikuti) of the Nepalese Royal House and Princess Wencheng of the Chinese Tang Dynasty. It is recorded that his palace was an enormous complex of buildings with three defensive walls and 999 rooms, plus one on the peak of the Red Mountain.

Following the collapse of the Tubo Dynasty in the 9th century, Tibetan society was plunged into a long period of turmoil, during which the Red Mountain Palace fell into disrepair. However, it began to assume the role of a religious site. During the 12th century Khyungpo Drakse of the Kadampa sect preached there, and it was later used for the same purpose by Tshurpu Karmapa and Tsongkapa, founder of the Gelukpa sect, and his disciples.

The Gelukpa sect developed rapidly in Tibet during the 15th century, assuming the dominant place. With the help of Gushri Khan, leader of the Mongol Khoshotd tribe, the 5th Dalai Lama defeated the Karmapa Dynasty in the mid 17th century and founded the Ganden Phodrang Dynasty. The dynasty's first seat of government was the Drepung Monastery; however, since the Red Mountain Palace had been the residence of Songtsen Gampo and was close to the three major temples of Drepung, Sera, and Ganden, it was decided to rebuild it in order to facilitate joint political and religious leadership. Reconstruction began in 1645, and three years later a complex of buildings with the White Palace (Phodrang Karpo) as its nucleus was completed. The 5th Dalai Lama moved there from Drepung Monastery, and ever since that time the Potala Palace has been the residence and seat of government of succeeding Dalai Lamas.

Building of the Red Palace was begun by Sangye Gyatsho, the chief executive official of the time, eight years after the death of the 5th Dalai Lama, as a memorial to him and to accommodate his funerary stupa. It was completed four years later, in 1694, and is second in size only to the White Palace. With its construction the Potala Palace became a vast complex of palace halls, Buddha halls, and stupas.

Funerary stupas (chortens) were added in memory of the 7th, 8th, 9th, and 13th Dalai Lamas, each within its own hall. The most recent is that of the 13th Dalai Lama, the building of which lasted from 1934 to 1936.

Special mention should be made of the fact that the Meditation Cave of the Dharma King, situated at the top of the mountain where Songtsen Gampo is said to have studied, and the Lokeshvara Chapel, both of which preceded the building of the present Palace, have been incorporated into the complex.

#### *Description*

The Potala Palace is located on the Red Mountain, 3700 m above sea level, in the centre of the Lhasa valley. It covers an area of over 130,000 m<sup>2</sup> and stands more than 110 m high. Its design is based on the concept of the "round city" that is a feature of Tibetan Buddhism.

The White Palace, which covers an area of c. 320 m east-west by c. 200 m north-south, is approached by a winding road, which leads to a broad level square measuring some 1500 m<sup>2</sup> in front of the Palace. The main building of the White Palace, named for its white-painted walls, is on the west of this platform. Its central section is the East Main Hall (25.8 m x 27.8 m), where all the main ceremonies, including the inauguration of the Dalai Lama, take place. The throne of the Dalai Lama is situated on the north side of the halls, the walls of which bear wall paintings depicting religious and historical themes.

At the top of the White Palace is the personal suite of rooms of the Dalai Lama, consisting of an audience hall, a sutra and dharma hall, the hall of the guardian deity of dharma, and the bedroom of the Dalai Lama.

The Red Palace (so called because of its red-painted walls) lies to the west of the White Palace. Its purpose is to house the stupas holding the remains of the Dalai Lamas, and it also has many Buddha and sutra halls. Its impressive bulk, together with the many gilded stupas, blends harmoniously with the White Palace and lends additional solemnity and magnificence to the Potala Palace as a whole.

To the west of the Red Palace is the Namgyel Dratshang, the private monastery of the Dalai Lama. Other components of the whole complex are the south square in front of it and the square and the Lukhand temple, containing unique wall paintings, to the north. The massive Palace walls, built of rammed earth and stone, are pierced by gates in the east, south, and west, and there are turrets at the south-east and north-west corners.

Within the Palace there are many outstanding wall paintings. Along the winding corridor on the second storey of the West Main Hall, for example, there are no fewer than 698 murals. The total is numbered in tens of thousands. The range of subject matter is wide, embracing historical figures and events, stories from the Buddhist sutras, religious myths, architectural motifs, athletic performances, and scenes of everyday life.

Another outstanding feature of the decoration of the Potala Palace is the *tangka* (paintings on silk, cloth, or paper scrolls with copper-, silver-, or gold-mounted wooden rollers). There are nearly ten thousand examples of this typically Tibetan form of art in the Palace. Their subjects are as diverse as the murals: Buddhist figures, deities, Buddhist sages, portraits of Dalai Lamas, Buddhist legends, fairy tales, historical stories, folk-life, astronomy, and medicine. Some of the *tangka* are embroidered, woven, or appliqué rather than painted.

There is a large and important series of sculptures in stone, wood, clay, and metal in the Potala Palace, many from India, Nepal, Kashmir, and elsewhere; they vary in height from over 10 m to a few millimetres and many of them are gilded. Other treasures there are Tibetan carpets, kadian, sutra streamers, canopies, curtains, porcelain, jade, and fine objects of gold and silver, as well as a large collection of sutras and important historical documents.

## **Management and Protection**

### *Legal status*

In accordance with Article 9 of the Law on the Protection of Cultural Relics of the People's Republic of China (1982), the protection zone of the Potala Palace has been defined, with the approval of the Regional Government, and registered with the State cultural and administrative departments. No construction is allowed within the protection zone without the approval of the appropriate agencies at Provincial and State level. The monument was on the first list of national protected monuments designated by the State in 1961.

### *Management*

The monument is administered by the Potala Palace Management Department of the Tibet Autonomous Region's Bureau of Culture.

## **Conservation and Authenticity**

### *Conservation history*

As befits its role as the centre of political and religious administration in Tibet, the Potala Palace has been systematically maintained since the 17th century.

When the monument came under the provisions of the Law on the Protection of Cultural Relics of the People's Republic of China, four principles were established for the preservation and management of historic buildings and cultural relics, in accordance with international charters and conventions:

- Preservation of the original form;
- Preservation of original structures;
- Preservation of original materials;
- Preservation of original craftsmanship.

All conservation and restoration work that has been carried out in the course of the most recent Nine-Year Plan has respected these principles. This will extend to the removal of houses and shops that have been built in the environs of the Palace in recent years.

Funds for the preservation and maintenance of cultural relics designated by the central government are allocated under separate headings in State and Provincial budgets. Experts are also made available by central government agencies to assist and advise in this work.

A management plan has been prepared by the Tibet Autonomous Region's Bureau of Culture. This includes:

- Implementation of an overall restoration and maintenance programme, financed by special funding that has been made available since 1989 by the State Council of the People's Republic of China. In order to satisfy the desire of both monks and lay people to worship at the Palace, and also to meet the tourist demand, it has been kept open throughout this period.
- There has been a continuous programme of sensibilization and promotion, designed to increase the awareness on the part of both religious and lay people of the cultural importance of the Potala Palace and of the imperative need to protect it and pass it on to succeeding generations.
- Local laws and regulations have been promulgated to exercise strict control over the surroundings of the monument. The Palace forms the key zone for the preservation of the historic features of Lhasa as an outstanding historical and cultural city.
- Safety and security regulations and systems have been adopted, placing responsibility on departments and individuals. Daily routine checks have been stepped up, fire-fighting and security systems have been installed, and measures have been introduced to restrict the numbers of tourists or to disperse them over a wider area.

#### *Authenticity*

The authenticity of the Potala Palace resides essentially in its setting and in its integrity as a religious and political administrative complex that has developed organically over centuries. These are intact, and the level of authenticity is heightened by the insistence by the authorities on respect for the four principles prescribed in the Chinese system.

#### **Evaluation**

##### *Action taken by ICOMOS*

An ICOMOS expert mission visited the Potala Palace in May 1994. The mission commended highly the quality of the restoration work carried out over the past six years (which has been the subject of uninformed criticism in some quarters) and the comprehensive coverage of the management plan. It felt strongly, however, that urgent consideration should be given to the preservation of the historic village of Shöl, the Tsulakhang Temple, and Chakpori Hill, which might in due course constitute an extension of the proposed World Heritage monument.

ICOMOS also consulted Dr Heather Stoddard, Head of Tibetan Studies at the Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales, Paris, who confirmed the exceptional value of the Potala Palace and also recommended eventual extension of the potential World Heritage monument to include Shöl and other neighbouring monuments.

#### *Qualities*

For many centuries Lhasa was the capital of a theocratic government, the administrative, religious, and symbolic centre of which was the Potala Palace. The monument embodies this function perfectly in its location, its layout, its component parts, and its decoration.

In aesthetic terms the artistic treasures contained within and forming an integral part of the Palace are universally acknowledged to be an unrivalled expression of Buddhist art.

### *Comparative analysis*

In the Buddhist world of eastern Asia there is no other example of a theocratic government of the type that endured so long in Tibet. For this reason the complex of buildings that form the Potala Palace is unique. The only direct comparison that might be made, in terms both of scale and of artistic wealth, would be with the Holy See, but that represents another of the world's great religions, the monuments of all of which are worthy of consideration independently for inclusion on the World Heritage List.

### *ICOMOS recommendation for future action*

ICOMOS has been concerned by reports that have reached it in recent years about the destruction of cultural and religious monuments in Tibet. It has been informed of proposals believed to be under consideration or being implemented which will have a profound effect on the historic urban fabric of the city of Lhasa. Whilst ICOMOS is satisfied that the immediate environment and setting of the Potala Palace are well protected by the existing regulations, it would urge the responsible authorities to give careful consideration to a possible reappraisal of the overall plan, so as to ensure that the Palace will survive in a setting that is worthy of it and does not conflict with its historic quality. ICOMOS is especially concerned about the demolition of historic buildings in the vicinity of the Potala Palace and their replacement by modern structures.

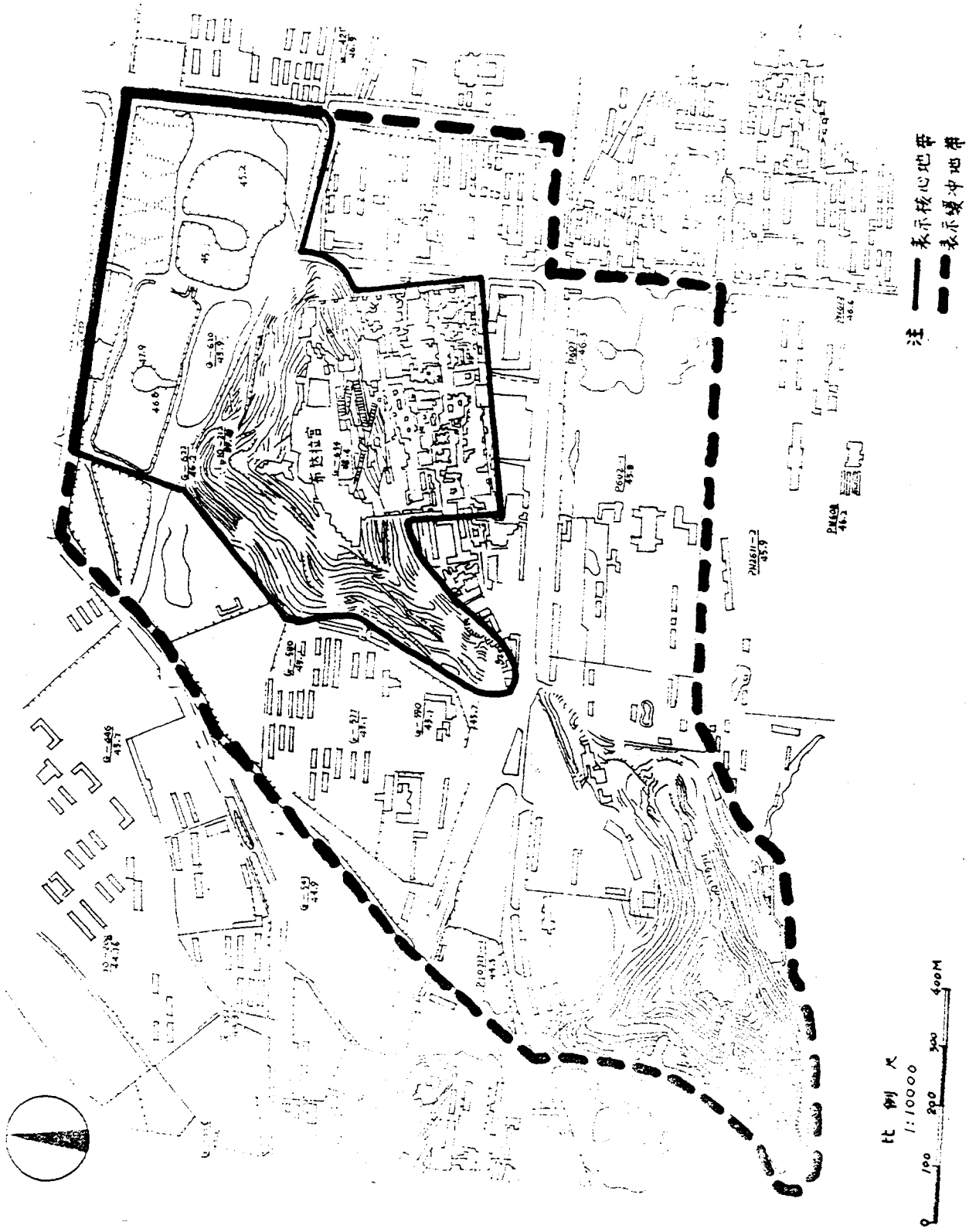
The Potala Palace is inseparably linked in spiritual and historical terms with the Tsuklakhang Temple and the holy city of Lhasa itself. ICOMOS therefore recommends the Government of the People's Republic of China to give consideration to an eventual extension of the Potala Palace nomination to include the whole area (including the historic village of Shöl, the Lukhang Temple and its willow park, and Chakpori Hill).

### **Recommendation**

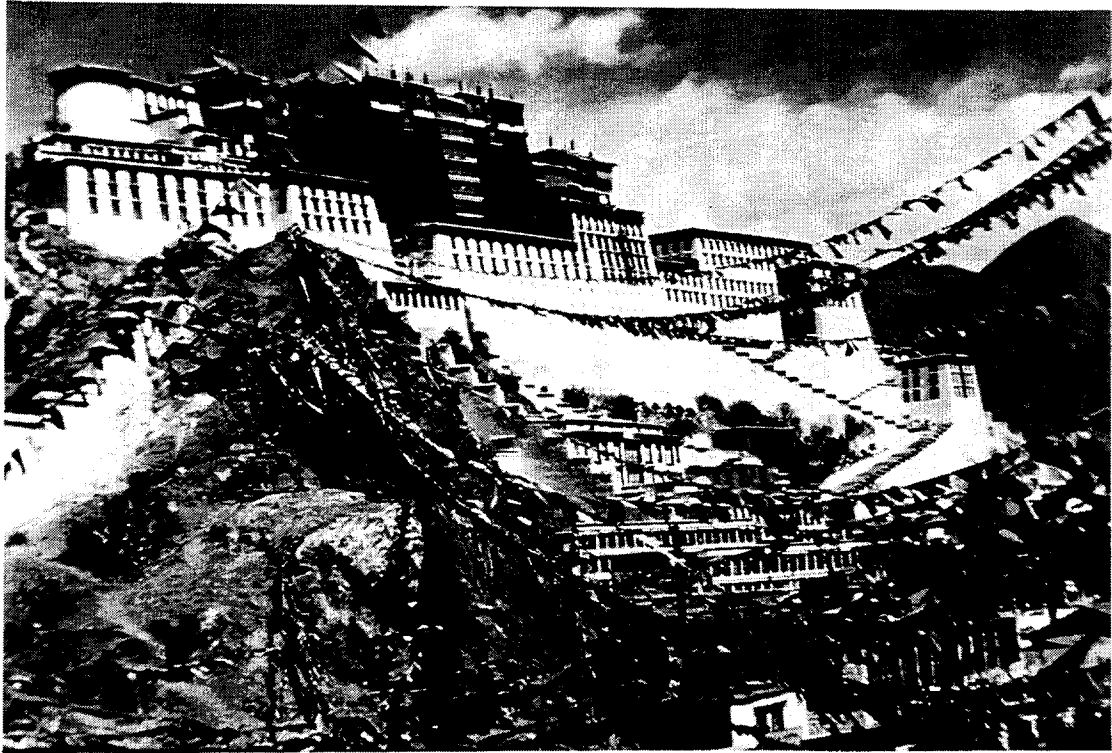
That this property be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of criteria i, iv, and vi:

- **Criterion i** The Potala Palace is an outstanding work of human imagination and creativity for its design, for its decoration, and for its harmonious setting within a dramatic landscape.
- **Criterion iv** The scale and artistic wealth of the Potala Palace, which represents the apogee of Tibetan architecture, make it an outstanding example of theocratic architecture, of which it was the last surviving example in the modern world.
- **Criterion vi** The Potala Palace is a potent and exceptional symbol of the integration of secular and religious authority into a single entity.

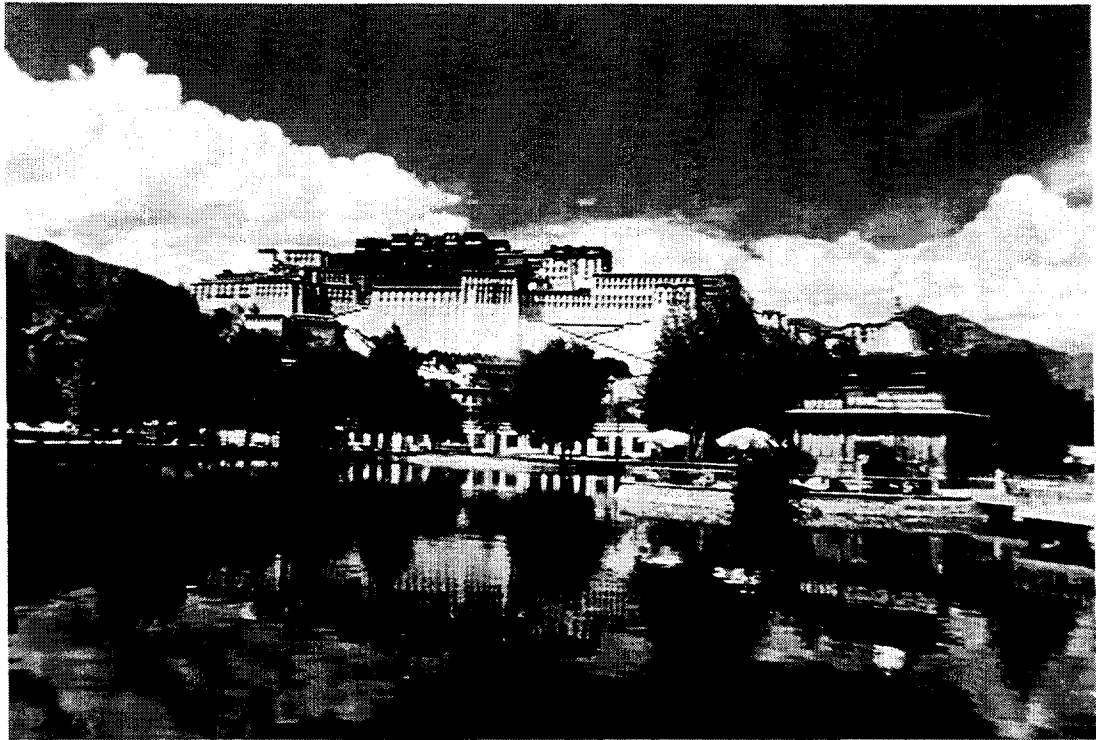
ICOMOS, October 1994



Palais du Potala : plan indiquant la zone de protection /  
 Potala Palace : map showing the protection area



Palais du Potala : vue du sud-ouest /  
Potala Palace : south-west view



Palais du Potala : vue d'ensemble /  
Potala Palace : general view