



The scale of place: from Asia to Meru Nyingba

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A place is best described in relation to the space in which it occupies. This space exists on many different levels when a place is described in the context of its environment. With each place comes a body of information that can be scaled from a very localized level to the global and eventually universal level. The scaling of information about a place can be described graphically from world map to building plan. A map can serve as a diagram of graphical information about a place in which relationships are presented visually. Rich digital media provides a medium for expanding the experience of place by providing interactive content that engages the user in a variety of forms.

This presentation will attempt to contextualize the concept of a place and illustrate the scale at which information about a place can be experienced through rich media technologies with respect to interdisciplinary and collaborative studies of Tibetan places. Particular focus involves the mapping of the neighborhoods of Lhasa and an innovative model for integrating ethnohistorical studies, maps and rich visualizations.

It is difficult to focus on a place as a singular static entity when by nature every place is embedded within a complex array of larger environments which determines its full significance. The room of a building cannot be completely isolated when it is necessary to relate the approach to a room through a door or hallway or some other part of the constructed whole. Likewise the edifice itself also has a relationship to the location upon which it rests whether it is an open field or densely populated neighborhood. There are many different levels at which a place may be described and as the scale broadens so does the information about a place. This project attempts to present the information about places through the use of digital maps. The focus is on the Barkor as a neighborhood composed of individual buildings and places. To relate the Barkor as place within places a hierarchy has been developed to define the different levels of environmental scale. This hierarchy spans from the broadest view at the global level, to the continental, country, province, city, neighborhood, eventually to the building level and then rooms within a building. Within the Barkor special attention has been paid to the Meru Nyingba monas-

tic complex. Meru Nyingbu is a built microcosm within itself incorporating a main temple as well as surrounding residential galleries about a courtyard. It is a place that is not as overwhelming in scale and complexity as the Jokhang temple, and it is typical in layout and form of many other monastic complexes in Tibet. Much field data has been gathered about this place to make Meru Nyingba a justifiable case study in representing the scale of place.

The medium of digital media offers many ways to present the complex experience of a place in context of its environment. No longer do concepts need to be represented by static two-dimensional images and diagrams. Images come to life in the digital medium through interactivity, animation and multidimensional technologies. Digital maps are the base layer for conveying information. These are constructed from GIS data using ArcView GIS software. To make this data universally attainable the map data is converted to vector graphics and imported into Flash. Flash is chosen as the most capable medium for presenting the data on the web due to the ubiquity of its plugin and its inherent flexibility and dynamic ability. A map of the Barkor neighborhood was constructed in this manner presenting the outlines of its buildings. Each building outline is a button that accesses data from a MySQL database backend via PHP commands. An XML document created from the database also feeds information back into Flash to define the graphics and provide visual information. A cycle of information pours through the graphical interface updated by backend.

A case study of Meru Nyingba is accessed from the Barkor map presenting a variety of media by which the monastic complex is experienced. A 3D model was constructed of Meru Nyingba from architectural drawings generously donated by the Tibet Heritage Fund. This model helped generate a variety of presentation media. A slideshow is provided of 3D renderings exploring the various architectural views of Meru Nyingba including elevations, sections and exploded views. A 3D animated movie clip shows an aerial approach to a section representation of the main entrance with views of the major mani wheels. A non-linear user-guided exploration of the spatial composition of the Meru Nyingba gomba can be experienced in a VRML model presentation. 3D icons are provided within the model that access movie clips of interior and exterior spaces as well as provide access to QuickTime VR objects describing artefacts typical of a Tibetan gomba, and panoramas of the place and its position within the Barkor. Architectural views of a place help to place focus on the construction and composition of a building. 3D technologies can take the viewer on an experiential tour of the space and shape an understanding of the temporal nature of a place and its surroundings.

This project is a work in progress and continues to be developed. It is the future goal that the techniques and pedagogy of this project will be able to be applied to other similar projects in a generic tool as the current prototype becomes more refined. It is also a goal that this project can be useful to other projects of similar nature in ultimately creating a generic tool for presenting places within their spaces.