

# **Likir Monastery**

## **The structuring principles of the complex**

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### ***About the author***

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### **Introduction to the monasteries of Ladakh**

Buddhism is the fundamental factor that defines the way of life and as a result the built environment in Ladakh. The monasteries of the early period of 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> century were representative of the political and religious landscape of the time. Buddhism was being reinforced and popularized throughout Tibet and Ladakh regions and monasteries played the predominant role of place of worship and learning. Standardization of practices as well as the architectural elements takes place during the later period (14<sup>th</sup> century onwards). This is also the time that monasteries play a very important socio- cultural and hence political role and begin to control immense resources and become part of the political decision making process. The monastery of Likir in Ladakh is a good example of a monastery that evolved during this later period.

### **The form of the Likir complex**

The monastery is located on top of a hill along side the valley of river Indus. The valley has agricultural fields at the lower level and the monastery complex occupying the high grounds. The main temple is roughly at the highest plateau of the hill. The complex itself consists of the main temple, the assembly hall, the monk's quarters, and services such as kitchen and dining as its main recognizable parts. The parts of the complex has been modified and built over a long period of time, and its present state suggest a well fortified, compact and strategically sited monastery.

### **The centrality in belief system and its impact on the plan**

The Buddhist religion revolves around the teaching of an individual – Lord Buddha. Whereas the teachers or Lamas of the past do hold very important position in the mythology and general beliefs system, the position of Buddha is central to the faith. This centrality in source of religious belief is reflected in the overall arrangement of the monastery complex itself.

The Likir monastery consists of many parts – the main worship areas along with learning areas, the administrative and head monk's area, the residential areas for monks and the service areas. The most important aspect of the organization is that there is only one central space and all other spaces are mere incidental or rather accidental. 'Central space' here refers to a singular gesture of open and closed space that is seen in the complex to be the most important due to its nature of expression. The space formed by the main entrance courtyard with the sacred temple and the assembly hall opening to it is the most important expression in the overall plan organization. The court is of a generous proportion with a very well defined edge on two sides in form of covered corridor. The scale, proportion and treatment of this space are a very clear expression of its importance.

The sacred temple (Gu-Khnag) and the assembly hall are more or less standard type that is common in this part of the Himalayas<sup>1</sup>. The remaining spaces that have formed over time are never accorded the kind of importance or elaboration and are a result of utilitarian necessity along with climatic and topographic consideration

### **The political conditions and the fortress monastery**

Likir monastery underwent expansion in the 15<sup>th</sup> century under Lhawang Lodos Sangphu. The geo-political landscape during this period was generally marked by bitter struggle for control of land. As mentioned earlier monasteries in Tibet and Ladakh region were command and control points for the region. Monasteries controlled and owned large tracts of land and there by the agricultural produce. Conflicts with rival sects of monasteries for political and material control were pretty common. They had to protect its inhabitants and its wealth from rival attacks. Monasteries that flourished during this period evolved their complexes as small fortress perched on strategic height, utilizing the terrain and reinforcing it with thick peripheral walls to form a protected inner core. Likir monastery is a classic example of such type of a fort-monastery. The basic hierarchy of the village houses at the lower slope, followed by monk's residence and then finally the main temple and assembly hall complex at the upper plateau. The main complex has narrow entry and exit points and has shear wall surrounding its periphery results in creation of a protected fort like complex. The monasteries of later period (after 15<sup>th</sup> century) usually evolved into a compact, well protected fortress kind features – main monastery temple at the highest point followed by monks residence just below them and their after the village houses, thick peripheral walls and narrow residual open spaces as movement paths. The monastery of Alchi which flourished in the earlier period, has spread out plan organization on a level ground is a good example of monastery of the earlier period.

### **Processions, festivals and the central court**

Throughout the year certain public processions takes place in the complex. These processions, held on auspicious days usually start behind the main temple in the open court around the Stupa, which often symbolize gateways before start of a journey. The procession path goes around the structures to finally reach the main temple court.

This is the place for large gathering and performances during the festival. The size of the court is the outcome of this gesture of public activity. A peripheral linear open space, like a street thus connects the major part of the complex.

### **Circumambulation and the open space**

This is an integral daily ritual that a devout would perform in the monastery. The circumambulation around buildings of religious significance leads to a roughly defined open space being left around the building. The open spaces around the main temple and assembly hall derive their definition from this particular ritual and by the way of their proportion and volume seem to suggest a certain purpose. For example the open spaces around the main complex do not have any predominant pause points or spaces that would suggest a break from the circumambulation, which is the primary purposed of these paths.

By analyzing the built form of the Likir monastery it is very clear that the predominant definition of the complex come from two most fundamental parameters. The first being the basic structure of the Tibetan Buddhist religious belief system with very strong central ideas related to the teaching of Lord Buddha as well as the practice of rituals in form of processions, festivals and circumambulations. The second parameter is the political role that the monasteries were playing in the region, that lead to the need for defense and hence fortification

### **Credits**

All drawings and photographs are contributed by Anar Memon, unless otherwise mentioned

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<sup>1</sup> It is common to have the head monks quarters and working area on the first floor of the temple or the assembly hall in many monasteries in the region.



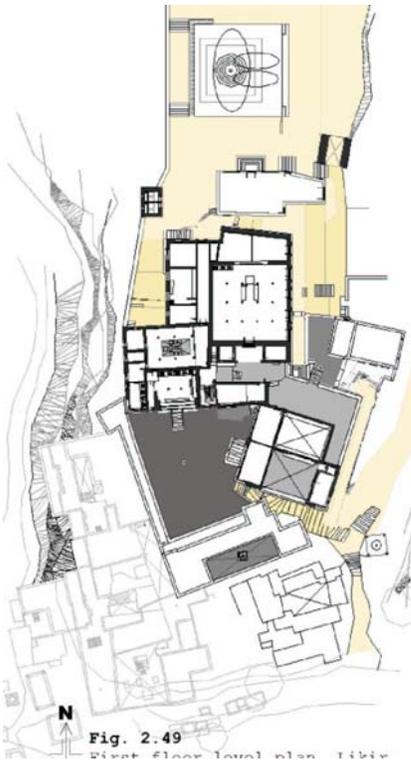
View of Likir Monastery



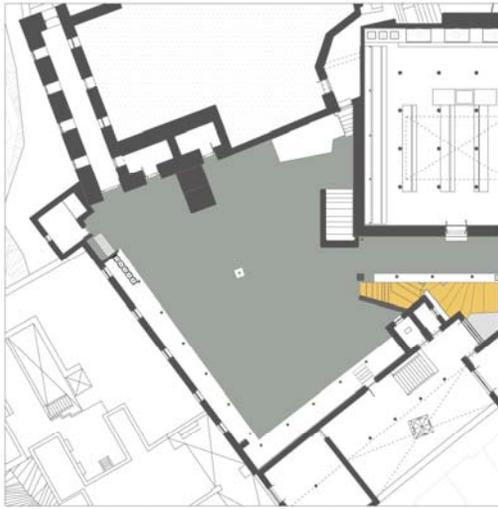
The main temple facade



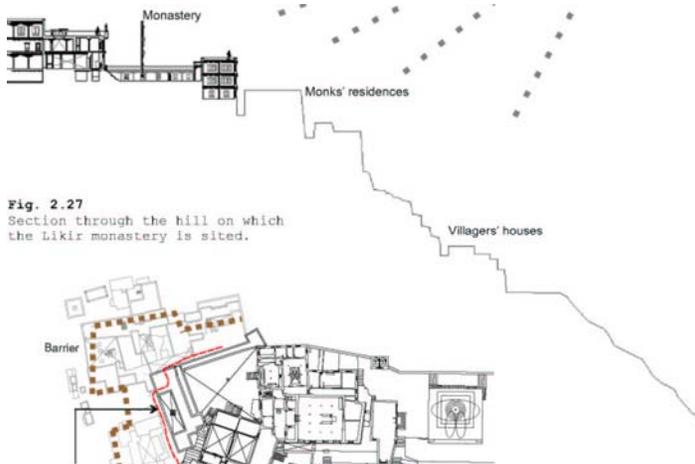
The main court used by monks for dance practice



Plan of the Monastery



Plan showing the central court of the monastery



**Fig. 2.27**  
Section through the hill on which  
the Likir monastery is sited.

Section showing the usage of hierarchy of spaces on the hill



Fig. 2.87

Plan indicating the ritual pathways in the monastery