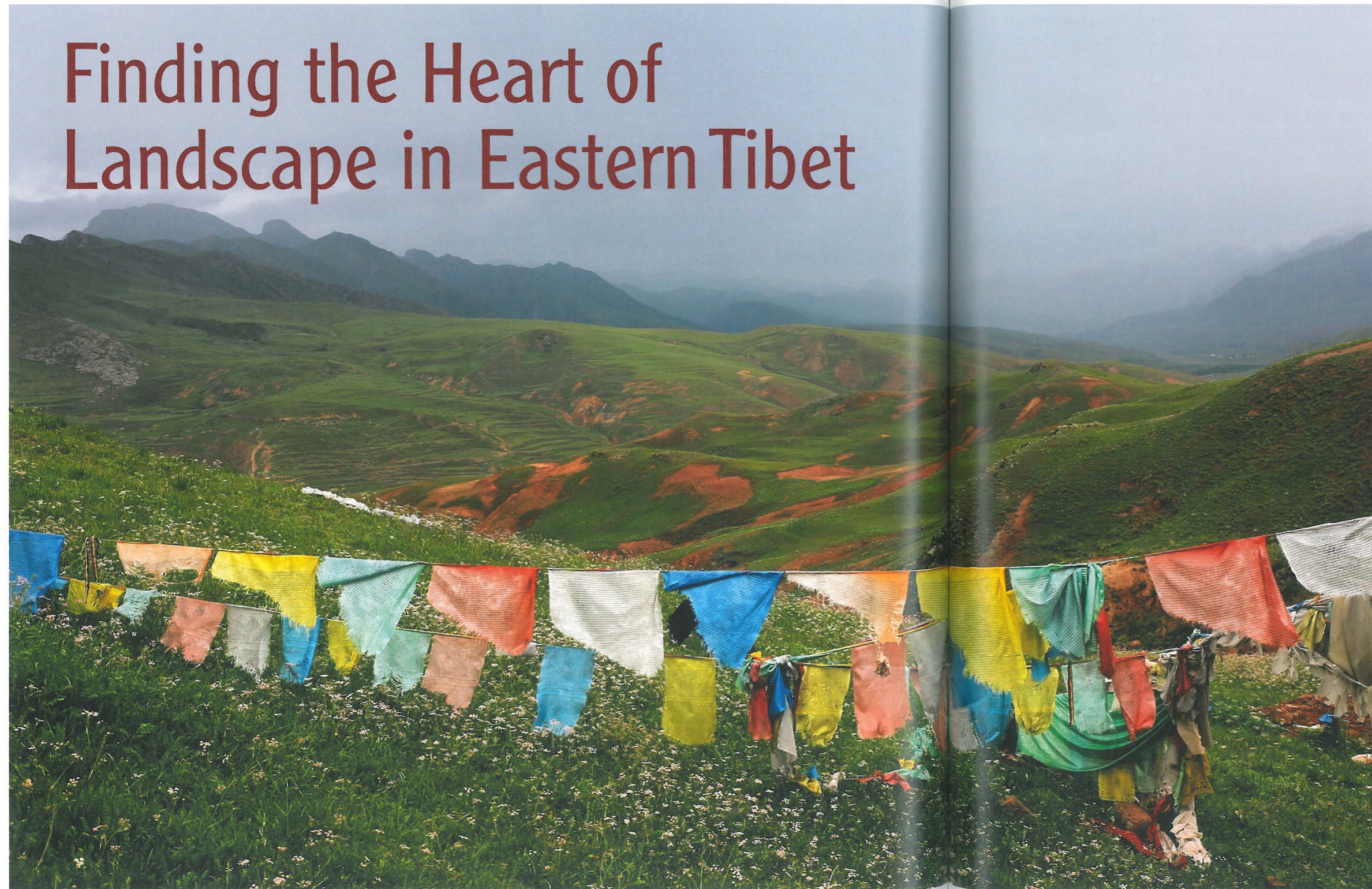


In Eastern Tibet a deep-seated and traditional relationship to the land persists. Tibetan prayer flags frame the view of a verdant valley near Nangchen, Qinghai Province.

Finding the Heart of Landscape in Eastern Tibet



Scott Jennings Melbourne

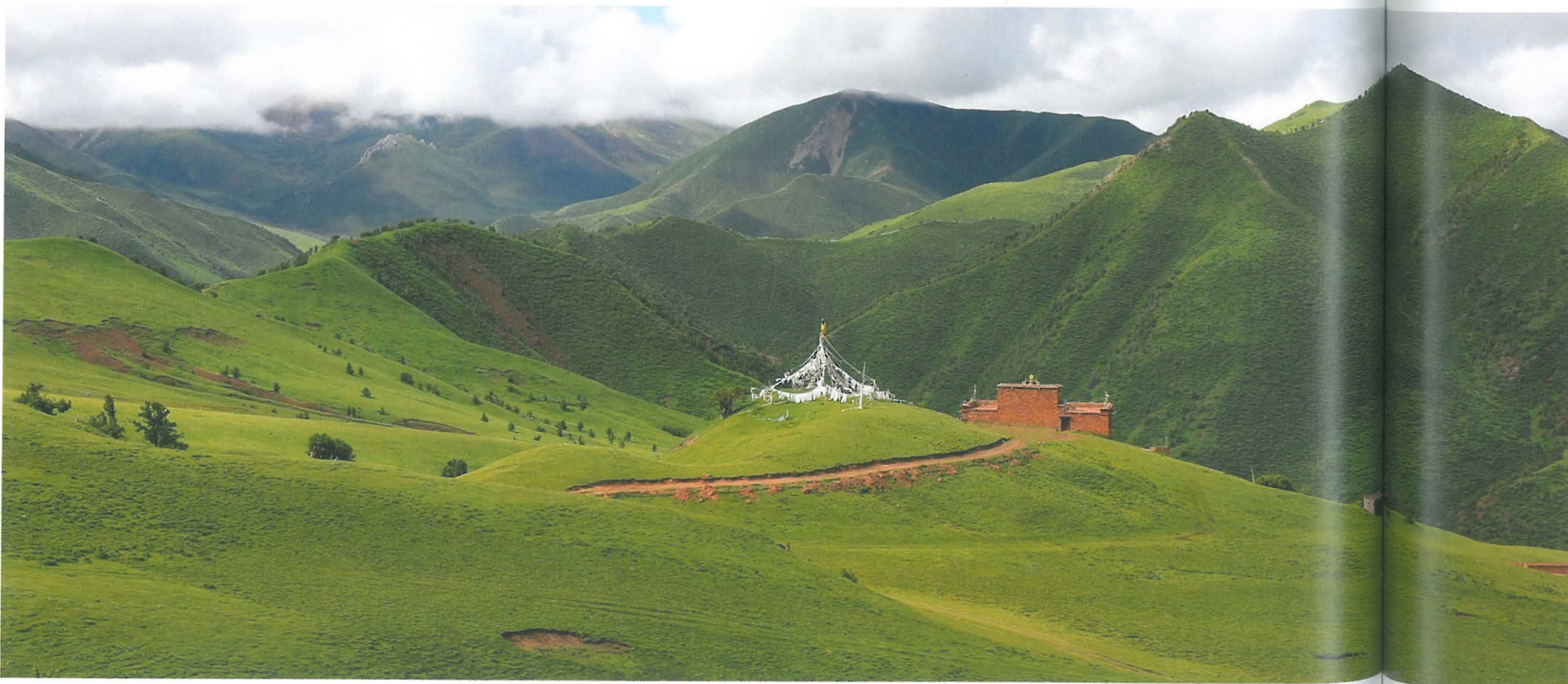
Nangchen, Eastern Tibet, has long been central to the Drukpa Lineage of Tibetan Buddhism and Chakchen Ling Monastery is a growing institution. A development framework for such a notable place needs to keep the impact on the site minimal and respect the identity of the landscape.

In the northeastern reaches of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, it is the vastness of the place that most impresses. Perched at elevations often surpassing 4,000 meters above a very distant sea level, the summer months bring an almost overwhelming greenness to the landscape, with a carpet-like mat of vegetation dominating the field of vision. This alpine tundra condition, which might more generally be experienced as ribbon-like intervals between mountainous contours, is here stretched to drape undulating landforms extending hundreds of kilometers. Upper valleys are dotted with stupas, while the slow-moving distant black dots of Tibetan yaks animate the horizon. Trees are rare, typically found as stunted junipers sprinkled across steeper slopes. The sky does not loom so much as open up overhead, with a purity of blue almost unbelievable to a visitor from one of the region's polluted metropolises. It is a place of conjoined environmental and cultural integrity where a deep-seated and traditional relationship to the land persists. So far it is being complemented more than overtaken by encroaching fixtures of modernity.

To a foreign visitor landing at its one-flight-a-day outpost of an airport Yushu has a frontier town feeling that belies its many centuries of history, with stark natural beauty contrasted by the pulse of housing, roads, and other infrastructure under construction largely with support from China's central government. Inside one of the few local restaurants the friendly host might take your order in Mandarin, but this is an outlier, and on the streets reaching out to the surrounding hills it is Tibetan that is heard spoken between friends.

Rambling south in the direction of the Tibet Autonomous Region border, makeshift roads transition to in-progress infrastructure upgrades, with sophisticated highways abruptly transforming to gravel base course,

Monks engage in debate exercises within the room-like central gathering space of the existing monastery. The south-facing site is highly remote, at elevations exceeding 4,000 metres.



then to dirt road, and on back again to asphalt. The staccato of paving material transitions accompanies Tibetan pop music being played on repeat, and a passenger bouncing along in the backseat may calculate such a drive as potentially continuing for days with minimal variation.

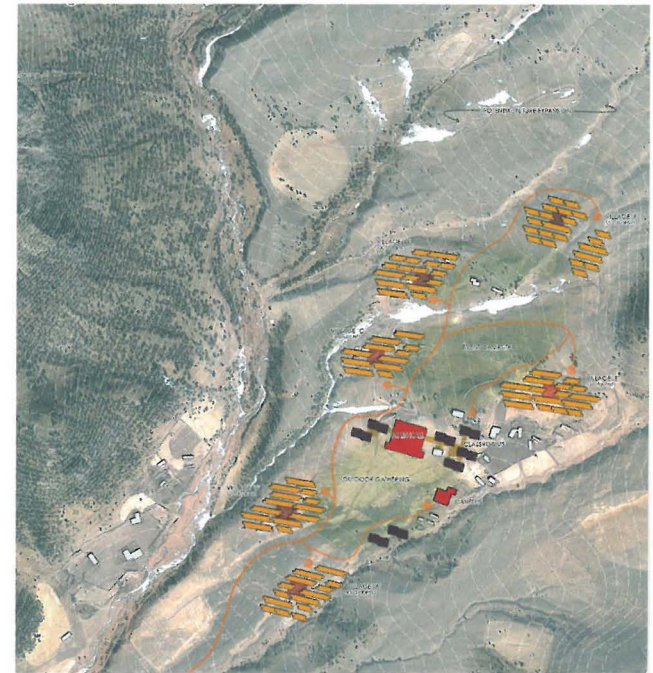
Nangchen has long been central to the Drukpa Lineage of Tibetan Buddhism – or Himalayan Buddhism, as His Holiness the Gyalwang Drukpa more inclusively describes it – and a visit to the new stupa under construction at the periphery of town offers a reminder for how very much alive this spiritual way of being is, not as something preserved in isolation but instead robust and grounded in place. Walking the grounds of this site with monks from disparate monasteries, it becomes clear that these spiritual leaders share a warm sense of brotherhood. They have limited opportunity to visit each other in person, but their friendships span a lifetime; one of many examples for how space and time play a different role in this place than with the modern experience.

Our ultimate destination is the Chakchen Ling Monastery, where His Holiness encouraged members of the Hong Kong-based non-profit organization Live to Love International to visit and look for opportunities to offer long-term assistance. Recognizing the potential need for design guidance, I had generously been invited to participate in this most cinematic of site visits.

At the Chakchen Ling Monastery site my traveling companions and I learn about how the teachings of the monastery's rinpoche have resonated with young people in the region to the point that junior monks continue arriving at the site, often with quite literally nothing more than a modest suitcase of belongings and eagerness to learn. Although all are welcome, formal facilities have not been built to support this growing group, and students have generally been charged with constructing themselves the simple mud brick structures they call home.

As romantic as the notion of design-build dormitories may seem, however, this context is no Taliesin West where students keep a pressed tuxedo at the ready for evening dinners with Mr. Wright. Instead, this is a deeply rural existence anchored within a nomadic culture, where the tranquility of balmy summer days is contrasted by the penetrating freeze of winter when temperatures plummet to as low as -30 °C. The nearest medical facilities are many hours away, and much of the sustenance is supported through a localized, traditional relationship to the land. This place has been and will continue to be off the electrical grid far into the foreseeable future.

An outside designer would be right to remain wary of making recommendations in such an unfamiliar locale, but walking the site we are able to learn from the vernacular works already in place. Existing structures



Anticipated Spatial Requirements

- Living; 30,000 square metres
- Teaching; 6,000 square metres
- Gathering; 4,500 square metres
- Dining; 1,500 square metres

CHAKCHEN LING MONASTERY, EASTERN TIBET,
QINGHAI PROVINCE, CHINA

Client: Live to Love International

Landscape architects: Scott Melbourne Studio

Construction: 2013 – present

Area: 90 hectares

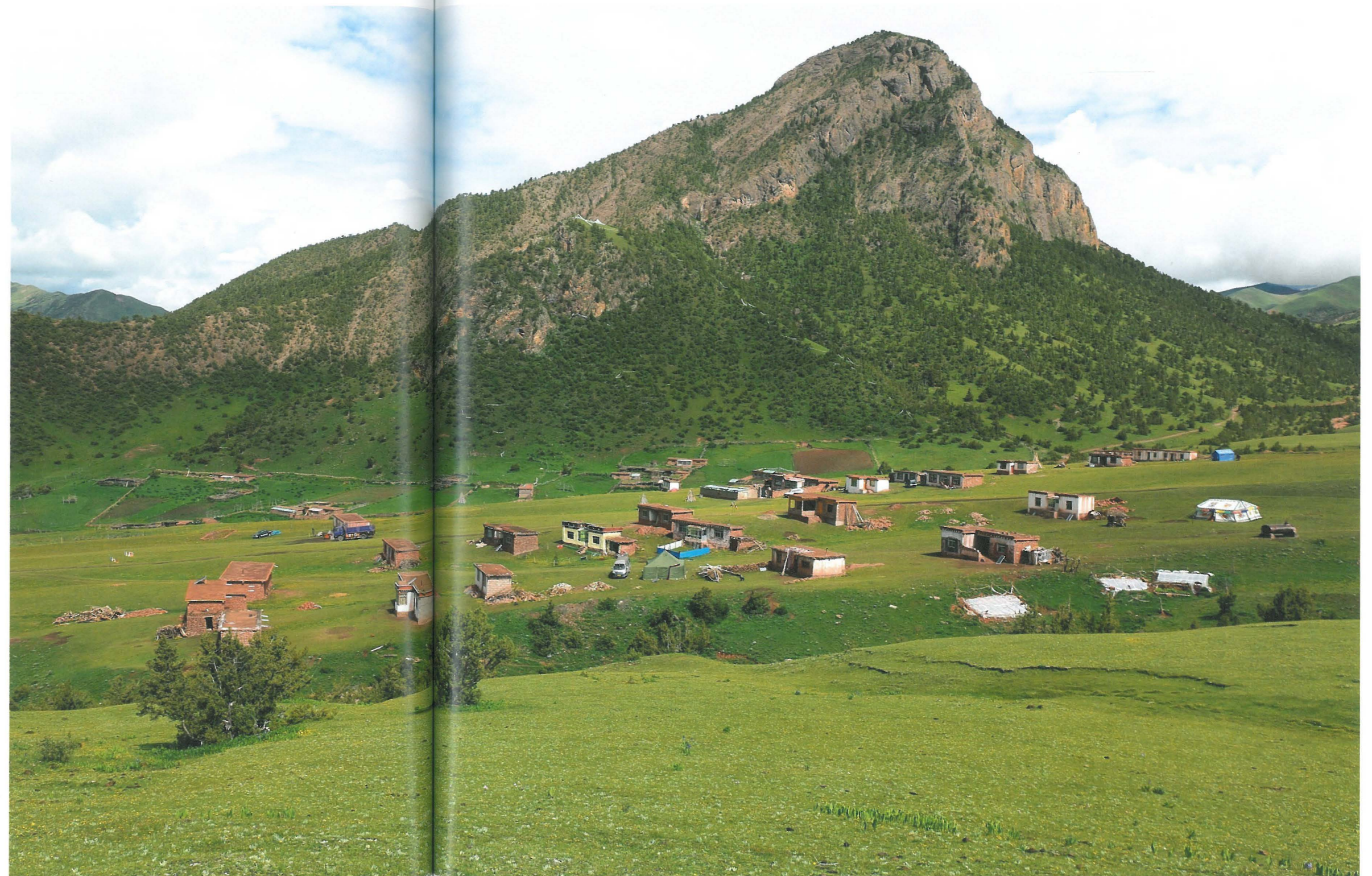
are mostly linear and south-facing for maximum solar exposure, located within a slope range not too steep to build upon but also not so flat to risk flooding. With significant seismic activity in the region, structures remain limited to a single story so as to minimize consequences brought by their potential failure. A central open space has the feeling of an outdoor room, and during our visit we see it used for monks and nuns conducting dramatic “debate” exercises that look more like interrogations, save for the telling smiles that sneak out as participants attempt to stay in character. At the center of this space, a few elderly women look on in appreciation, spinning prayer wheels while a Tibetan mastiff dozes at their feet.

Working our way to explore the upper reaches of the site, we enter what in person can immediately be felt as an additional valley with the distinct potential to house future growth. Our small group increases in number as more young monks join our walk. “Most of them have never seen someone that looks like you, not in person,” I am told. The statement is difficult to process, even if it should not have been surprising. Returning to practical matters, I ask what I expect to be a simple question about where the property line is located. There is some confusion, so I ask again but this time for the “red line,” proud for my use of the Chinese term. There is more discussion, in English, Cantonese, Mandarin, Tibetan, and on back to English. Our local host looks at me with a kind smile and I am told over a chorus of giggles, “Here there is no such thing.”

Back in Hong Kong, our group works toward the opportunity and challenge of developing a framework for growth that will allow the monastery to jump from its current capacity of 200 to something closer to 2,000 students, all while imposing a minimal impact to the site. Looking to find a footing for proceeding with the project, I am surprised to find the most valuable first step to be taking contractual verbiage recently used with a developer of luxury villas in Beijing and adapting it to this altogether different context. The outlined sequence of steps include: interpret and document site conditions; identify program goals and translate them to spatial requirements; test options for distributing activities across the site; and finally, elucidate an adaptive framework that at its most essential delineates areas allowed to be transformed versus those intended to be preserved. This discipline of our discipline is more powerful than we sometimes recognize, and for those beyond the purview of conventional practice may be both novel and immensely helpful.

The gift of the monastery project has been a clearer understanding for what designers have to offer a world at once increasingly small but also infinitely large, deeply challenged but also filled with beauty. Within the constraints of a limited building season and physical remoteness, construction now patiently proceeds.

Existing structures in Nangchen are oriented for maximum solar exposure and situated on gentle slopes that provide positive drainage during the spring snow melt.





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Landscape Identity

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