



དབང་ WANG
འདུལ་ DUE
ཆོས་ CHHOE
འཇིག་ LING
པོ་ PALACE

Bringing Wangduechoeling Palace Back to Life



In the geographic center and cultural heartland of Bhutan,

a monumental 19th century royal residence is undergoing a meticulous restoration and transformation into a vibrant cultural complex that will showcase Bhutan's history, art, craft, and architecture. The Wangduechoeling Palace, cradled in the green expanse of the Bumthang Valley, is of unique importance to Bhutan both as an architectural treasure and the birthplace of Bhutan's monarchy. Yet the Palace remained in a neglected condition for decades, with the paintings and carvings rapidly deteriorating.

The Royal Government of Bhutan and the Bhutan Foundation — under the patronage of Her Majesty the Queen Mother Gyalyum Tseyring Pem Wangchuck — are working to restore the Palace to its original stately beauty while investing in preparing for its use as a unique showcase for the history, living arts, and culture of Bhutan.

World Monuments Fund lists the Palace as an endangered heritage structure in its World Monuments Watch program, describing it as “an architectural masterpiece” with “magnificent carvings and paintings” that “provides an opportunity to restore a unique heritage site.”



History & Religion at the Palace



BUILT ON THE BATTLEFIELD where Jigme Namgyal, the forefather of the Wangchuck dynasty, conquered his rivals in the 1850s, the construction of the Palace marked the beginning of a modern era of peace and prosperity in Bhutan and the end of a time characterized by warring feudal states. As the birthplace of Ugyen Wangchuck, the first king of Bhutan, and home to the royal court of the Wangchuck dynasty, the Palace symbolized the country's growth of sociocultural and political stability and served as Bhutan's political center for more than a century. It was located strategically amid a network of trading routes and highways before roads were constructed, making it an important landmark in the region.

The name Wangduechhoeling is a combination of *Wangdue*, meaning "victorious," and *Chhoeling*, meaning "a place that is rich in Buddhism." With its

numerous ancient monasteries, Bumthang Valley is the spiritual heartland of Bhutan, and the Palace embodies the core aspects of Buddhism related to the early history of Bhutan, Bhutan's royal family, and the Bumthang Valley. The *Lingkha Lhakhang* (monastery) within the Palace complex continues to be an active place of worship for the local community. It has been restored and will remain accessible to the local devotees to continue this tradition.

The Palace complex also houses a sacred shrine of the royal family on the top floor of the *Utse* (central tower), where visitors continue to make daily offerings; five *chukhor manis* (water-powered prayer wheels); and a *chorten maap* (a Buddhist monument, or *stupa*). These spiritual spaces and elements collectively exhibit how deeply Buddhism was rooted in the daily lives of the royal family and the courtiers who lived here.



Wangduechoeling's Architectural Significance

WANGDUECHHOELING PALACE IS an extraordinary example of traditional Bhutanese architecture and craftsmanship, which continue to influence contemporary Bhutanese building practices. The paintings on the facade of the Palace are distinctive and rarely found in any other structure in Bhutan, and the building's intricate architectural details have been used as reference points for many other traditional constructions in the region. The building's wooden shutters and woodwork were originally painted — and are being restored — with special mineral paints.

This Palace was the first large structure built for residential purposes in Bhutan without a defense function; at the time of its construction, most other large structures were fortresses (*dzong*). In addition to the main Palace, the grounds house other structures with historical significance, including the *chukhor mani*, *chorten maap*, *bachu* (archery range), and *Lingkha Lhakhang*.



The Project to Bring Wangduechhoeling Palace Back to Life



Our vision is to preserve Wangduechhoeling Palace to promote Bhutan's cultural heritage and inherent values.

The complex will serve as a replicable example of adaptive reuse of a heritage site in Bhutan through research, education, exhibitions, and outreach. Its programs will provide an authentic historic environment that will create a bridge for visitors' imaginations to engage with important stories from the past to better understand the present. This approach has been enthusiastically endorsed by communities around the Palace, as well as local and international stakeholders.

Total investments of U.S. \$3 million have thus far been used on the critical first phase of the project – physically preserving this unique architectural treasure – which was completed in July 2021. The funding was used in part to build the capacity of local artisans and architects so that they could pursue painstaking preservation and restoration of the original structure without over-restoring or rebuilding.

The project has now entered the adaptive reuse phase, during which stakeholders establish it as a vibrant cultural site and modern museum that connects the present with the past and the future. The goal is to optimize the use of this unique portal to the past so that Bhutanese and other visitors from around the world may better appreciate Bhutanese history and culture.

A Vision of the New Wangduechoeling Palace

THE RENEWED Wangduechoeling Palace, as a modern museum and cultural center, will present to both Bhutanese and foreign visitors the engaging history, Buddhist values, and living arts that underpin Bhutanese culture and continue to sustain its people.

The restoration and adaptation project has adopted universal design to make the Palace inclusive for all visitors, including the elderly, children, and people with disabilities. Likewise, the contents of the Palace are intended to appeal to Bhutanese and international visitors alike. The Palace will be the first museum in Bhutan that integrates digital content, multimedia, and audio-visuals to provide an immersive and memorable experience for visitors.

The renewed Wangduechoeling Palace will play a variety of roles in its capacity as a vibrant cultural resource for Bhutanese people and visitors from around the world.

I. An Educational Institution



The Palace will house a series of galleries, which will depict the stories of life in the royal courts, unique arts and crafts of the royal household and surrounding valleys, and the socioeconomic and cultural significance of the Palace. As the birthplace of the first king of Bhutan, the Palace was home to much history, many stories, and a way of life. Documents and objects will be on display in the former Royal Quarters of their Majesties. Rooms like the King's Chamber and Royal Treasury have been restored and will be populated with artifacts, either original or re-created.

Some of the information used in these displays comes directly from interviews with descendants of the attendants and courtiers who worked in the Palace in service of the royal family in the early 1900s. Audio-visual components will further inform visitors of court life in the time of the kings and their families. The galleries aim to elicit inquiry and curiosity and encourage visitors to learn more about the history, provenance, and present status of Bhutanese culture and arts.

II. A Living Museum

The Palace will be much more than a repository of antique objects and exhibitions, opting instead to embrace the “living museum” concept, which aims to preserve traditional arts and crafts by showing how they remain relevant in today's world. A diverse array of programs involving locals, artisans, scholars, and researchers will bring Bhutanese history and culture to life and provide an open, vibrant, and interactive platform for learning about Bhutanese history, arts, crafts, and architecture.

Bhutanese arts and crafts thrived under the patronage of the royal family. Fine jewelry and ornaments, intricate textile patterns, and music flourished with support from the royal household. Programs at the Palace will revive, conserve, and promote the distinct cultural heritage emanating from the Palace and Bumthang Valley via demonstrations and outreach programs.

Bhutanese artisans practicing the country's traditional arts will be invited to the Palace to work and demonstrate their skills for visitors and fellow artisans. Thus, the Palace will serve as a “think tank” for preserving traditional arts by educating visitors on their traditions and making them relevant in today's world. Local traditions include crafts like silversmithing and wood-turning taught at *Zorig Chusum*, an institution that offers instruction in



Bhutan's 13 traditional arts; living arts such as the local textile weaving; and culinary specialties such as buckwheat noodles (*jangbuli*), pancakes, and a traditional sweet called *baktsi makhu*.

The project will also restore the Palace grounds, including the archery field, which will be made accessible for recreational use by locals and visitors. Future uses of the grounds remain under discussion and may include rental for meetings, weddings, and other events. Culinary events may be hosted at the museum café.

III.

An In-Person and Virtual Learning Lab



The Palace will serve as an enabling space for Bhutanese schools in surrounding Bumthang Valley and across the country to engage with the country's history and culture. Community outreach programs and events will also inform and educate through activities like archery and spiritual festivals. For example, the local community has requested to celebrate the annual Mela festival that was hosted on the Palace grounds during the time of the second king.

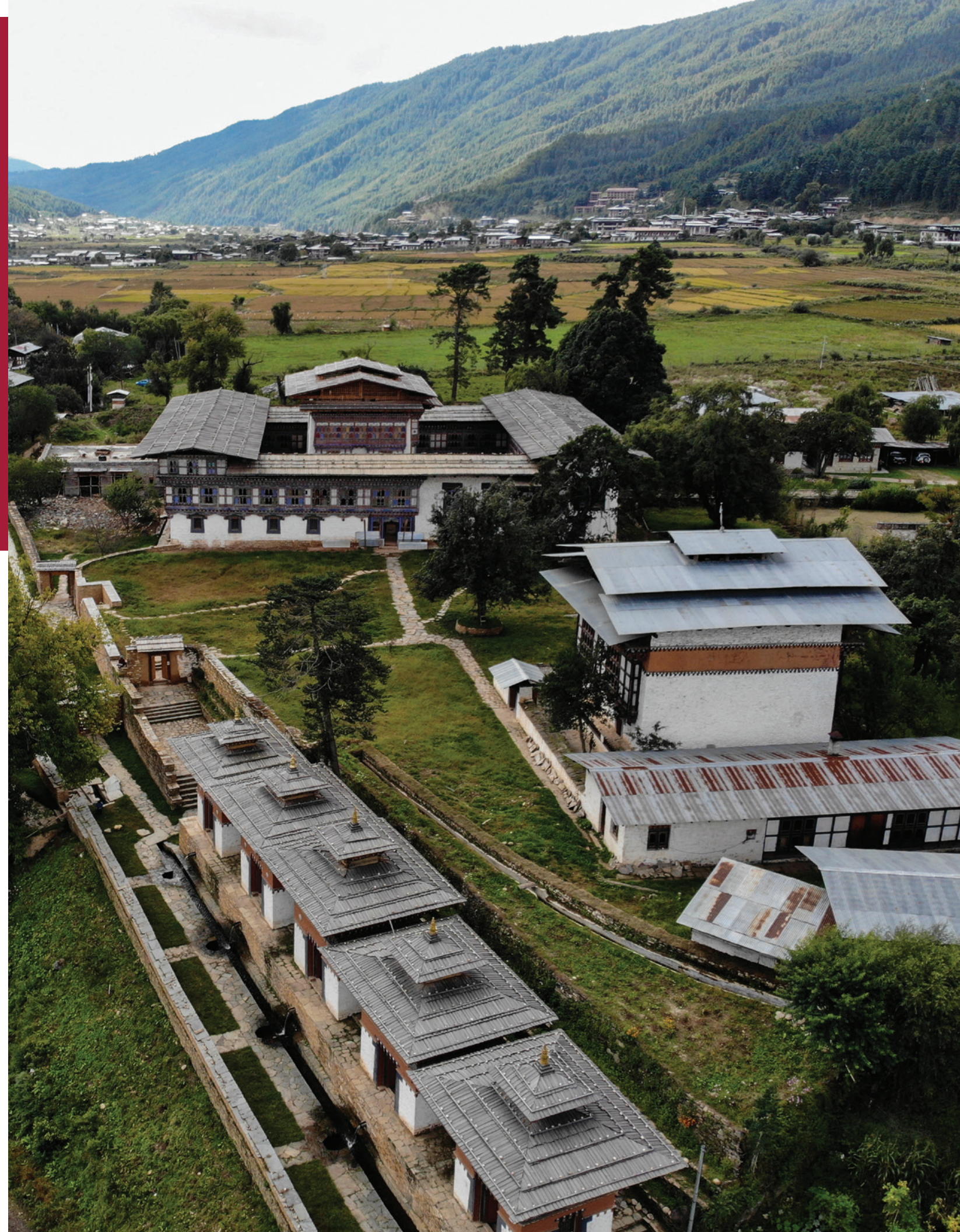
As with excellent museums worldwide, the Palace is also working to develop and promote online experiences, taking advantage of the latest technologies, including virtual and augmented reality. The Palace plans to explore these possibilities in detail and determine how they can be deployed to enrich the museum experience. These virtual experiences can also offer opportunities for membership programs and other potential sources of revenue.



Once there is ample research capacity at the Palace, the institution could position itself as a research institution to promote the study of Bhutanese history, art, and culture, and initiate research projects in collaboration with other museums and cultural institutions such as the Center for Bhutan Studies, Royal Textile Academy, and others abroad. For example, researchers could work with colleagues from the College of Language and Cultural Studies (CLCS) in nearby Trongsa to produce publications focusing on the Palace and Bumthang and Trongsa communities.

The Palace has the potential to work with the Royal Government of Bhutan, civil society organizations, and private organizations to create a space for conferences, dialogues, and lecture series. For instance, the Palace could be a potential site of the Biennial for contemporary Buddhist art from all Buddhist countries around the world. Another institution nearby that may be open to fruitful collaboration is the Ugyen Wangchuck Institute for Conservation and Environmental Research (UWICER) located in Bumthang.

In addition, Bhutanese history, art, and cultural exchange programs that engage with museums and universities outside the country could be a revenue-earner for the Palace with the purpose of enticing researchers to visit and study at the Palace.



V.

A Spiritual and Cultural Center



Buddhism, the root of Bhutanese culture and values, will remain at the core of the Palace. Exhibitions will include presentations on unique aspects of Buddhism related to the Bumthang Valley. The *Lingkha Lhakhang*, just outside the Palace walls, is an active place of worship for the local community and has also been restored and will remain accessible to the public. The altar room in the *Utse* has been restored by the Royal Government of Bhutan and will have limited access without disturbance by visitors.

The Palace will create programming that revolves around local religious festivals during which Bhutanese and foreign tourists travel to Bumthang. This could provide creative windows to explain Bhutanese culture and history to younger generations of Bhutanese who participate in these cultural activities with their families. Programs that support crossing generations are critical to the overall vision of the Palace. As such, the Palace will engage in activities that bring the younger generation in touch with spiritual and religious practices that they can understand in today's context by collaborating with other religious foundations in Bumthang and abroad.



The renovated Palace will have a museum shop and a café, both of which can generate employment opportunities and bring in weavers and craftsmen, providing them income-generating opportunities. The café will be open to the general public so that both tourists and locals can enjoy its services.

Special events at the Palace can also attract visitors and supply local jobs. There is room to host special high-end events on the south and east lawns, with the magnificent architecture of the Palace as the backdrop. These events could entertain state guests or dignitaries, boosting the revenue for Palace operations and providing local employment opportunities.

VI.

A Generator of Tourism and Employment

Historically, the Palace played an important role in the collection of state revenues through various in-kind taxes. With this restoration project, the Palace can play a new kind of role in the not just the country's economy, but also its regional economy. The Palace presents an significant opportunity to generate revenue from tourism and employment as Bhutan emerges from the COVID-19 pandemic.

As an unparalleled attraction in Bumthang, the Palace will play a pivotal role in enticing visitors to central and eastern Bhutan, generating revenue and employment, and bridging the western and eastern regions of the country. With its domestic airport across the river from the Palace, Bumthang serves as an essential gateway for tourism into eastern Bhutan.



Bhutan at a Crossroads We Need Your Help

As our once-isolated kingdom opens up to the world, its age-old Buddhist culture and traditional lifestyles are shifting. Most of its future depends on how we steward the country's cultural resources; engage our people, especially our youth; and educate the wider world about the values and heritage of Bhutan.

By investing in this exciting project to bring Wangduechoeling Palace back to life, you will be a part of an important effort to ensure that Bhutan and its culture thrive for centuries to come.

If you would like to get involved with this project please contact us. We look forward to partnering with you on this important journey.

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