

THE SYMBOLISM BEHIND UTEP'S BHUTANESE ARCHITECTURE

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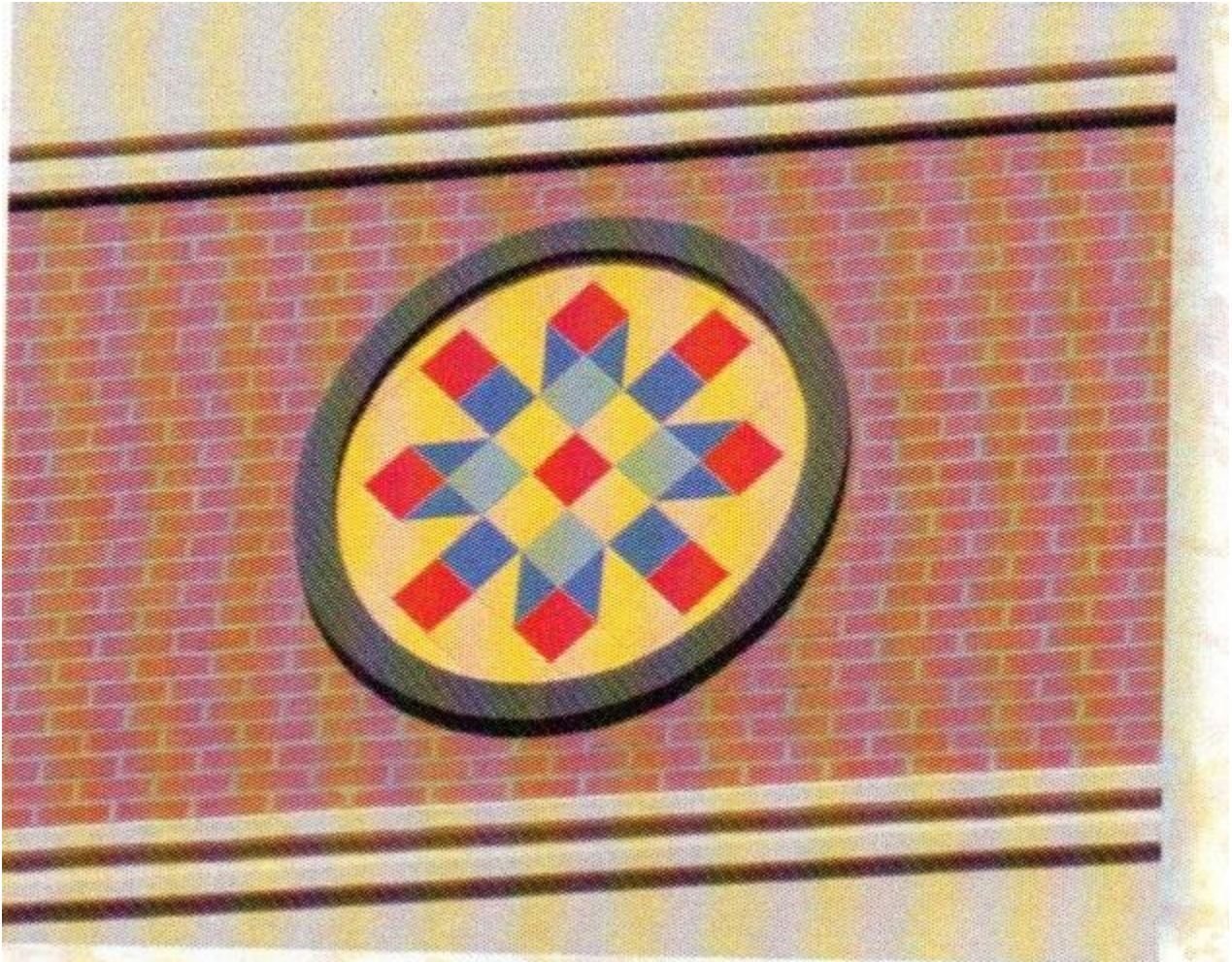


Bhutanese Prayer Wheel, a gift from the people of Bhutan, on display in Chihuahuan Desert Garden

While the Bhutanese architectural influence is easily identified on UTEP's campus, the symbolism behind the characteristic features may be less well known. Buddhism, the dominant religion in Bhutan has influenced style and design features of Bhutanese buildings. These features found their way onto UTEP's buildings through the architects who used John Claude White's 1914 *National Geographic* article, "Castles in the Air: Experiences and Journey's into the Unknown Bhutan" as a guide for the University's earliest Bhutanese-styled buildings .

In his article, White described monasteries in Bhutan being painted "a dull light gray on the lower story, with a broad band of madder red above, and shingle roofs, on the top of which are gilded canopies." Old Main and several other buildings were styled after Bhutanese monasteries with the gray-brown stucco finish and red brick band wrapping around the upper levels of the buildings. The brick line on UTEP's buildings may be one of the most prominent aesthetic motifs at the university; in Bhutan it denotes a religious institution. In 1967 Desmond Dong, a

Bhutanese architectural specialist wrote the following about UTEP's buildings: "The ornamental band distinguishes religious buildings in Tibet and Bhutan as monasteries, chapels, and such...I wonder if the students know how close they are to monastery."



Mandala from the Health Sciences and Nursing Building

Imbedded in many of the brick bands are mosaic designs also known as mandalas (MAHN-dah-lah), which is Sanskrit for "circle." In Buddhism the mandala is a form of sacred art used most often to evoke deities. Each mandala is comprised of an outer circle encircling an eight pointed shape with a circle or square in the center of the design which is believed to hold a deity. The eight pointed design has four points usually pointing in the four compass directions. The other four points, called doors or gates, are usually embellished with decorative items and symbolize the collectivity of the Four Boundless Thoughts: love, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity. For Buddhist monks the mandala creates a meditative space within which they

believe they are able to achieve a level of consciousness by which they may attain their worldly and spiritual goals. Mandalas adorn many of UTEP's buildings using the colors yellow, white, red, green, and blue representing effort, faith, memory, meditative stabilization, and wisdom.

On the Psychology Building a different symbol decorates the façade. Three white circles, resembling a target, are called the wheels of life in Buddhism. These circles each have an individual meaning but combined they represent the evolution of changes that a human goes through in life. The center circle is representative of the root of man's evils, the second is symbolic of stages humans pass through such as, birth, religious life, sickness and death; the third outer ring is emblematic of the life of Buddha.

The grounds surrounding the Centennial Museum contain three more examples of Buddhist influence. At the entrance to the museum sit two large white pillar-like sculptures of prayer wheels built in 1936. In White's article on Bhutan he described a water driven prayer wheel: "A prayer wheel consists of a hollow cylinder filled with written or printed prayers and fixed to a perpendicular shaft of wood, to the lower end of which horizontal flappers are attached against which water from a chute; the end is shod with iron and revolves in an iron socket driven by the force of the stream. With each revolution the prayers are believed to be prayed for the benefit of the builder of that particular wheel and count as much to his credit." Turning the wheel symbolizes "turning the doctrine," one of Buddha's first teachings which suggest that Buddhist teachings go round and round, never stopping. The smaller hand-held prayer wheel usually bears a printed mantra and the holder rotates the wheel clockwise in order to gain enlightenment. The Chihuahuan Desert Garden features an actual prayer wheel, a gift from the people of Bhutan in 2003. The donated prayer wheel is similar to the wheels used at the entrances of Buddhist monasteries and was constructed in Bhutan. The Centennial Museum welcomes onlookers to "gently" turn the wheel— it is a functioning wheel.

On the hillside south of the Centennial Museum are several prayer flags. Traditionally they are used to promote peace, compassion, strength, or wisdom, and typically have a mantra or prayer printed on them. In Buddhism the placement of a prayer flag is accompanied by a religious ceremony. UTEP's flags are periodically changed by the museum but not until they have been well worn. It is the Buddhist belief that the fraying and wear on the flags is a sign that the prayers are being listened to. The flags are purchased by the museum from a prayer flag retailer.



Prayer flags outside of the Centennial Museum

The red brick stripes, mandalas, prayer wheels, and prayer flags are reminders of the influence of Buddhism on the Bhutanese architecture and design of UTEP. It is unknown if the original architects and designers of the oldest buildings on campus were aware of the deeply engrained Buddhist influence on the illustrative designs from the photographs in the *National Geographic Magazine* they were emulating. What is understood is that the designs were reproduced throughout UTEP's campus from 1917 to the present and with that replication UTEP has passed along symbolic designs of peace and unity.

[Sources: The University of Texas at El Paso Bhutanese Style Architecture Collection; *EL Paso Times*, February 4, 1973; *National Geographic Magazine*, April 1914; *Nova*, Volume 17, Number 2, March 1982; *Prayer Wheel* handout located in the Centennial Museum; *A Circle of Peace*, Cultural Center in El Paso; *Bhutan on the Border*, University of Texas at El Paso, 2012.]

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Ashley

Ashley Swarhout was a student in the Masters of Arts in Teaching English program at UTEP. She graduated in May 2013 and is now teaches dual credit at Chapin High School.