



# The architectural evolution of Mongolian temples

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## ABSTRACT

Mongolian temple architecture has undergone a remarkable evolution over the centuries, reflecting the country's deep-rooted religious traditions and its interactions with neighbouring cultures. This paper explores the architectural characteristics of key Mongolian temples, including Uuld Beisiin Khuree, Unstiin Khiid, Zaya Gegeenii Khuree, Amarbayasgalant Monastery, Erdene Zuu Monastery, and Gandan Monastery, tracing their development from their origins to the present day. The analysis focuses on the structural innovations, symbolic elements, and regional adaptations that shaped these temples. In addition, the paper examines the ongoing efforts to preserve these architectural treasures, emphasizing the importance of heritage conservation and the role of modern technologies in safeguarding Mongolia's cultural legacy for future generations.

## KEYWORDS

Mongolian architecture, Buddhist temples, cultural heritage, preservation

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Mongolian temples serve as profound testaments to the country's deep-rooted religious and cultural identity, reflecting centuries of spiritual devotion and artistic innovation. The arrival and establishment of Buddhism in Mongolia during the 16th century not only transformed the spiritual lives of its people but also became a defining force in shaping the architectural landscape of the nation. Over the centuries, these sacred structures have evolved into enduring symbols of faith, resilience, and cultural synthesis. The architectural style of Mongolian temples is characterized by a distinctive amalgamation of influences drawn from Tibetan, Chinese, and indigenous Mongolian traditions. This blending of styles demonstrates the dynamic exchanges between neighboring cultures while preserving elements that resonate with Mongolia's unique nomadic heritage. Unlike the rigid urban temples of Tibet or the intricate courtyards of Chinese religious sites, Mongolian temples often adapted to the expansive steppes and nomadic way of life, giving rise to innovative designs that harmonized with the natural environment (Fig. 1) [1].

These temples were more than places of worship; they were centers of learning, hubs of artistic expression, and repositories of cultural heritage. From grand monasteries that housed hundreds of monks to modest structures dedicated to local deities, each temple fulfilled specific spiritual, social, and political roles. Furthermore, the construction of these temples showcased advanced craftsmanship, with intricate woodwork, vibrant murals, and carefully planned spatial layouts that symbolized Buddhist cosmology. Exploring the architectural

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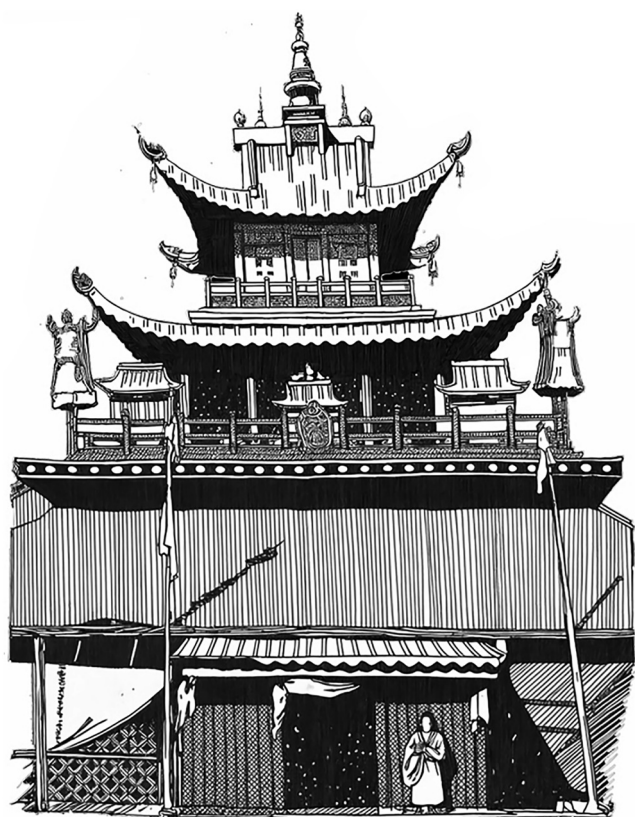


Fig. 1. Mongolian historic temple facade (Source: re-drawing by the Author based on historic drawing)

evolution of Mongolian temples, it becomes evident that these structures are not merely religious monuments but enduring reflections of a rich and complex history, deeply intertwined with the spiritual, cultural, and environmental context of Mongolia.

## 2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The establishment of temples in Mongolia can be traced back to the 16th century when Buddhism gained widespread acceptance among Mongolian rulers and communities. By the 17th century, the construction of temples flourished, fueled by the active patronage of khans and the spiritual leadership of Tibetan lamas. These temples marked a transformative era in Mongolian history, embedding Buddhist practices into daily life while shaping the broader cultural and social structure of the nation [2].

Unlike earlier sacred structures that reflected shamanistic practices, Buddhist temples introduced a more formalized religious architecture. Initially, these temples were relatively modest, blending into the nomadic lifestyle. However, as Buddhism became more entrenched, temples evolved into increasingly sophisticated complexes, showcasing an interplay of political power and religious authority.

Temples were strategically located to cater to diverse communities. Some were built near trade routes to serve as sanctuaries for travelers, while others were positioned in

isolated regions, symbolizing spiritual dedication. In urban centers, temples often featured elaborate designs, hosting festivals, and attracting pilgrims. These urban temples became important centers for learning and governance, reflecting the growing integration of religion into state affairs [3].

The 17th century also witnessed the rise of major monastic centers for instance Amarbayasgalant and Erdene Zuu Monastery (Fig. 2) [4]. These complexes were not only places of worship but also hubs for preserving sacred texts, artistic traditions, and the training of clergy. During this time, Buddhist institutions began to accumulate significant landholdings and wealth, reinforcing their influence across the steppes.

This historical period was marked by dynamic interactions between Buddhism and Mongolian society. While temples served as focal points for spiritual practice, they also played a key role in fostering social order, education, and the arts. By the end of the 17th century, these temples had become enduring symbols of Mongolia's religious and cultural identity, paving the way for architectural developments in subsequent centuries.

## 3. ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION OF TEMPLE ARCHITECTURE

The architectural development of Mongolian temples has its roots in the confluence of local traditions, Tibetan Buddhism, and Chinese architectural practices. Before the introduction of Buddhism, Mongolian sacred structures were largely influenced by shamanistic practices, often simple and portable to align with the nomadic lifestyle. However, with the rise of Buddhism in the 16th century, Mongolian architecture underwent a significant transformation, embracing permanent structures that reflected the teachings and cosmology of Buddhism.

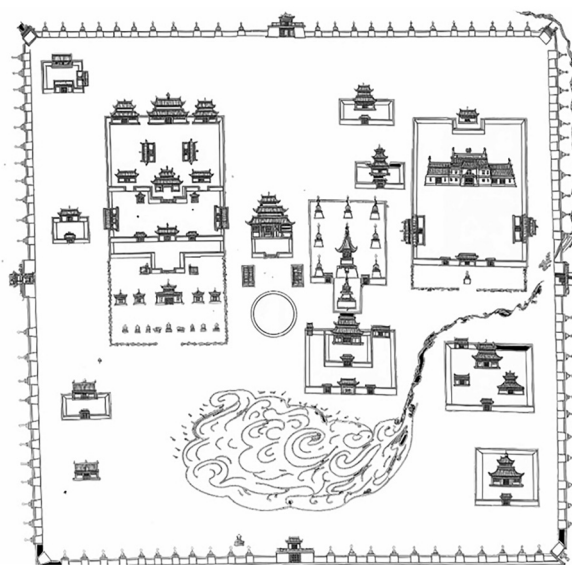


Fig. 2. Erdene Zuu Monastery Complex (Source: re-drawing by the Author based on historic drawing)

The earliest Buddhist temples in Mongolia were modeled after Tibetan designs, introduced by lamas and spiritual leaders from the Gelug school of Tibetan Buddhism. These initial structures were typically modest, consisting of single room shrines or small wooden temples, but they incorporated symbolic elements like stupas and prayer wheels that became central to Mongolian temple architecture. Over time, these designs evolved to accommodate local needs and environmental conditions, resulting in a unique fusion of styles.

One remarkable philosophical and architectural innovation attributed to Mongolia is the Concept of Zero, or the “Zero Point” drawing (Fig. 3) [4]. This concept, often credited to Zanabazar, the First Jebtsundamba Khutuktu and a revered artist and scholar, represents a spiritual approach to architectural planning [5]. The “Zero Point” drawing emphasizes establishing the spiritual essence and foundation of a building before its physical manifestation. It embodies the idea that sacred structures must align with cosmic principles and Buddhist teachings, ensuring that the building serves its spiritual purpose fully. This foundational concept has influenced how Mongolian temples are positioned, oriented, and designed, reflecting the interconnectedness of the spiritual and material realms.

Another defining characteristic of Mongolian temple architecture is its integration of nomadic and sedentary elements. Early temples often featured tent-like roofs and wooden frames, echoing the form of the traditional Mongolian ger (yurt) [6]. These adaptations allowed for easier construction and maintenance while retaining a connection to the nomadic heritage of the people. As temple construction advanced, larger, and more permanent structures emerged, characterized by elaborate roofs, spacious courtyards, and intricate wood carvings.

The influence of Chinese architecture became more pronounced during the Qing Dynasty, when Mongolia became a protectorate. Pagoda-style roofs, glazed tiles, and symmetrical layouts were incorporated into temple designs, reflecting the political and cultural ties between the two regions. However, these Chinese elements were often

blended with Tibetan spatial arrangements and Mongolian decorative motifs, creating a distinctive architectural style unique to Mongolia.

During the 17th and 18th centuries, temples began to adopt increasingly complex layouts and functions. Major monasteries like Erdene Zuu were constructed with multiple buildings, including assembly halls, meditation rooms, libraries, and stupas, often arranged to symbolize Buddhist cosmology. These large complexes served not only as places of worship but also as centers for education and artistic production.

The evolution of temple architecture in Mongolia also reflects the resilience and adaptability of its builders. Temples in the northern regions were constructed with thicker walls and steeper roofs to withstand harsh winters, while those in southern regions integrated courtyards and open spaces to suit the warmer climate. Despite these regional differences, Mongolian temple architecture consistently embodied a balance between functionality, spirituality, and aesthetic expression.

By the 19th century, Mongolian temple architecture had reached its peak, with grand monasteries displaying a harmonious blend of Tibetan, Chinese, and indigenous Mongolian styles. Concepts for example the “Zero Point” drawing highlight the deep philosophical underpinnings of this tradition, ensuring that each temple not only met physical and artistic standards but also adhered to spiritual principles. The evolution of these structures not only mirrored the changing spiritual and political landscape but also highlighted the creativity and craftsmanship of Mongolian builders, whose legacy continues to inspire admiration today.

#### 4. COMPARISON WITH TEMPLE STRUCTURES IN NEIGHBORING CULTURES

Mongolian temple architecture, while deeply rooted in its own cultural identity, has been shaped by significant influences from neighboring regions, particularly Tibet and China. These influences, however, have been adapted to Mongolia’s unique environment and nomadic traditions, resulting in distinct architectural and functional characteristics.

One of the most prominent influences comes from Tibetan Buddhism, which shaped the structural organization of Mongolian temples. Like Tibetan temples, Mongolian temple complexes often feature multi-tiered roofs, spacious assembly halls, and a strong emphasis on stupas as focal points. However, Mongolian temples are typically more compact and practical in design, reflecting the needs of a nomadic society and the challenging climatic conditions of the steppes. In contrast, Tibetan temples, built within more settled monastic traditions, tend to be larger, more fortress-like, and include intricate interior spaces for meditation and rituals [7] (Fig. 4).

Chinese architectural elements are also evident in Mongolian temples, particularly in roof designs. The use of

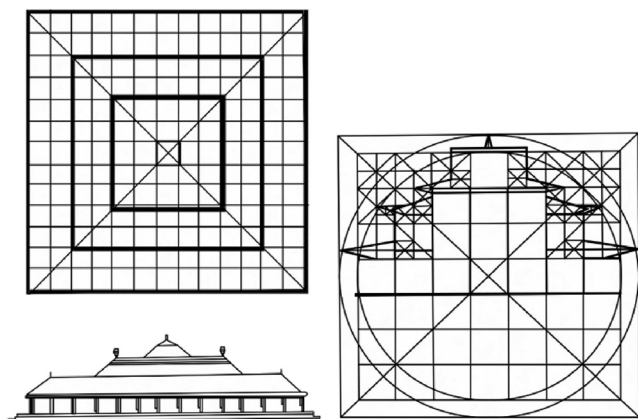


Fig. 3. “Zero pointed” drawing concept (Source: re-drawing by the Author based on historic drawing)



Fig. 4. Mongolian historic temple (Source: re-drawing by the Author based on historic drawing)

upturned eaves, ornate decorations, and multi-tiered structures in temples for instance Gandan Monastery and Zaya Gegeenii Khuree highlights this influence. These features not only serve aesthetic purposes but also reflect the Qing Dynasty's cultural and political impact on Mongolia during its history as a protectorate (Figs 4 and 5).

Distinctively, Mongolian temples reflect the nomadic culture of the Mongolian people. Unlike the more permanent stone structures commonly found in Chinese or Tibetan temples, Mongolian temples often utilized modular construction techniques and lightweight materials. This approach allowed for easier assembly and disassembly, making the structures more suited to a nomadic lifestyle. The compact layouts and practical designs ensured that the temples could withstand Mongolia's harsh climate while serving their spiritual purposes (Figs 6 and 7).

Through this synthesis of Tibetan, Chinese, and indigenous Mongolian traditions, Mongolian temples highlight a remarkable ability to adapt foreign influences to local needs. This interplay between practicality, spirituality, and cultural identity distinguishes Mongolian temple architecture from its regional counterparts.



Fig. 5. Mongolian historic temple (Source: re-drawing by the Author based on historic drawing)

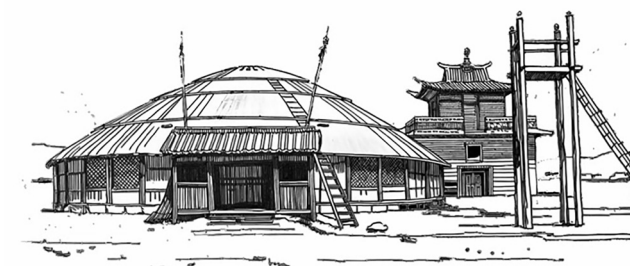
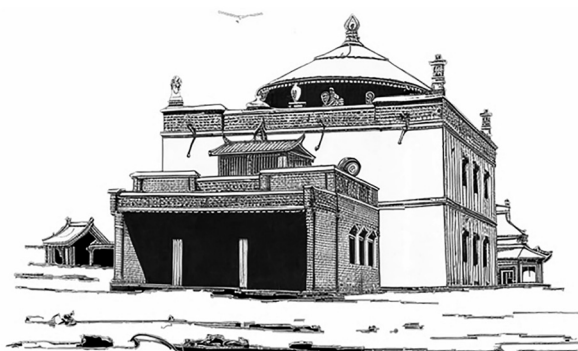


Fig. 6. Mongolian traditional temples (Source: re-drawing by the Author based on historic drawing)

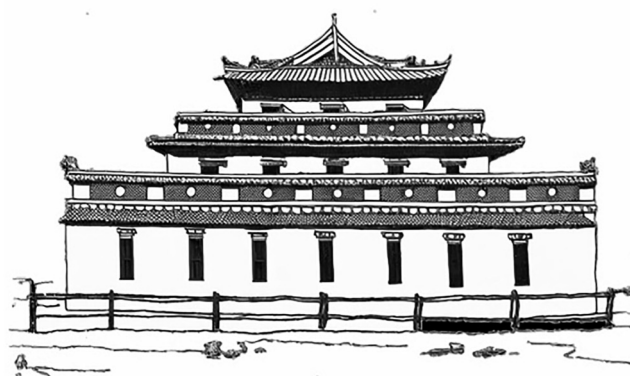


Fig. 7. Zaya Gegeen complex temple (Source: re-drawing by the Author based on historic drawing)

## 5. ARCHITECTURAL ELEMENTS AND SYMBOLISM

Mongolian temples are renowned for their intricate architectural elements and deep symbolism, which reflect the

spiritual and cultural values of the society that created them. Every component of a Mongolian temple, from its overall layout to its smallest decorative detail, carries profound religious and cultural meaning, designed to guide practitioners along a path of spiritual enlightenment [8].

A key element of Mongolian temple construction is the use of bracket and beam structures, known as *dougong*. These sets of brackets allow for layered roofing and efficient weight distribution, enabling the construction of large and visually striking roofs without compromising structural stability. The *dougong* sets are often intricately carved and decorated with Buddhist iconography, reinforcing the sacred nature of the temples while also serving a critical structural function [9].

One of the defining structural features of Mongolian temples is the use of pillars as critical load-bearing elements. These pillars support the heavy wooden beams and multi-tiered roofs that are characteristic of Mongolian temple design. Carefully spaced to distribute weight evenly, they ensure stability within large assembly halls and open spaces. The placement and design of these pillars also reflect a symbolic dimension, representing the balance between the physical and spiritual realms.

To accommodate Mongolia's seismic activity, flexible design principles are incorporated into the construction of temple pillars. The slightly flexible nature of these wooden structures allows them to absorb movement during earthquakes, preventing cracks and preserving the integrity of the building. This innovative design showcases the builders' understanding of the local environment and their ability to merge functionality with spiritual intention.

The arrangement of pillars within temples often reflects cosmological symbolism. At the heart of many temples is a central pillar or a set of central pillars, representing the *axis mundi* (world axis) - a symbolic connection between heaven, earth, and the spiritual realm. Surrounding this central axis are peripheral rows of pillars, which symbolize protective guardians and the cosmic order that supports the universe. This spatial organization not only provides structural stability but also enhances spiritual experience for practitioners.

Stupas (*suvara*), another prominent element in Mongolian temples, are sacred structures that represent the enlightened mind of the Buddha. Positioned prominently within temple complexes, stupas symbolize the five elements of Buddhist cosmology: earth, water, fire, air, and space. Their tiered designs reflect the path to enlightenment, while their alignment follows principles of sacred geometry.

The roof design of Mongolian temples blends practical considerations with symbolic meaning. Multi-tiered roofs with upturned eaves ward off evil spirits and redirect positive energy. Ornamented with vibrant colors and intricate carvings, these roofs signify layers of spiritual attainment and the connection between the earthly and celestial realms.

Mongolian temple construction also employs traditional joinery techniques, which do not rely on nails or metal fasteners. Instead, builders use precisely cut joints to secure beams and other structural elements. This method prevents the risk of rust and corrosion, ensuring that the buildings

remain durable over long periods. Traditional joinery also allows for a degree of movement in the structure, enhancing its ability to withstand seismic activity (Fig. 8).

These structures are crafted from locally sourced woods, primarily Siberian larch, or pine, which are naturally resistant to insects and well-suited to Mongolia's cold, dry climate. These woods not only provide durability but also flexibility, enabling the temples to withstand the extreme seasonal temperature fluctuations of the region.

The materials used in temple construction also hold symbolic value. Wood, often the primary material, represents life and natural harmony, while stone, clay, and metal symbolize strength and permanence. The integration of these materials reflects the Buddhist principles of balance and impermanence, ensuring that the temple embodies both the transient and eternal aspects of existence.

Even the rituals performed within temples engage directly with the architecture. Prayer wheels, often lining the perimeter of temples, invite physical interaction, reinforcing the structure's role as a transformative spiritual space. The careful arrangement of architectural elements amplifies the sacred energy of the temple, guiding practitioners toward spiritual reflection and growth.

In Mongolian temples, architecture and symbolism are inseparable. Whether through the structural innovations of load-bearing pillars or the spiritual representations embedded in stupas and carvings, every element is designed to connect the material and spiritual worlds (Fig. 9). These temples remain a profound testament to Mongolia's rich cultural and religious heritage.

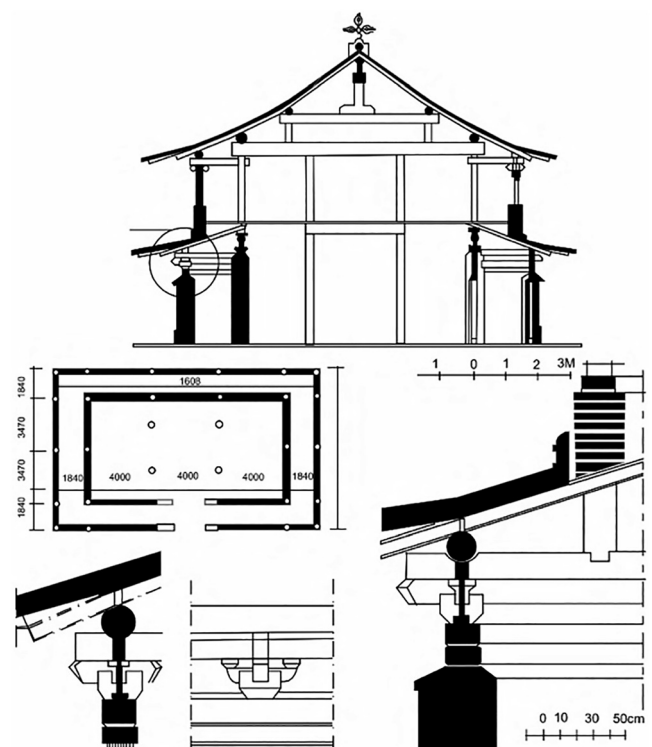


Fig. 8. Mongolian temple structure detailed section (Source: re-drawing by the Author based on historic drawing)

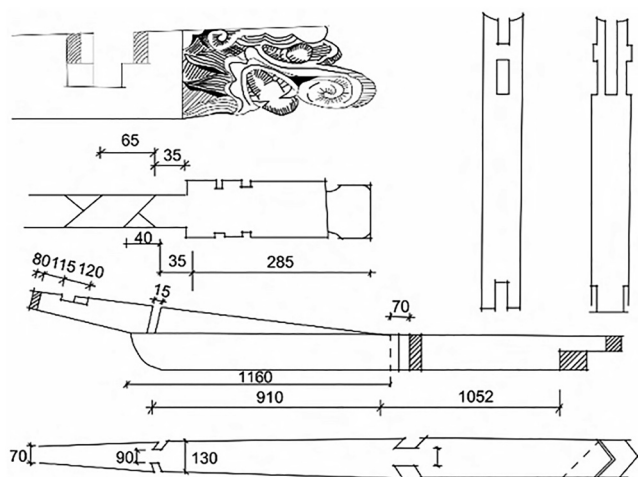


Fig. 9. Wooden beams details (Source: re-drawing by the Author based on historic drawing)

## 6. PRESERVATION AND HERITAGE CONSERVATION OF MONGOLIAN TEMPLES

Mongolian temple architecture, as a testament to the nation's spiritual and cultural identity, faces significant challenges in the modern era. The preservation of these architectural treasures is vital not only for safeguarding Mongolia's cultural legacy but also for maintaining a link to its historical and religious traditions. While many temples have endured centuries of environmental and political upheaval, the combined pressures of climate change, urbanization, and insufficient funding for conservation threaten their survival. Ongoing efforts in heritage conservation, supported by modern technologies and international collaborations, are crucial in ensuring these temples remain part of Mongolia's cultural landscape for future generations [10].

### 6.1. Challenges in societal and governmental recognition

Despite the cultural and historical importance of Mongolian temples, there is a significant lack of recognition and prioritization by both the government and society. In many cases, historical architecture is overshadowed by more immediate economic and developmental concerns. Government agencies responsible for cultural heritage often face funding constraints, mismanagement, and limited technical expertise, which hinder their ability to implement effective preservation strategies. Moreover, there is often little coordination between these agencies and local communities, leading to inefficiencies in preservation efforts [11].

The broader society, including local communities, often does not fully acknowledge the value of preserving historical architecture, viewing it as an economic burden rather than an asset. This lack of awareness can result in neglect, unauthorized modifications, or even demolition of historical structures to make way for new developments. Additionally,

the high costs of restoration and maintenance deter investment in these projects, particularly in rural areas where economic resources are scarce.

### 6.2. Resistance to modern techniques and architectural designs

Another significant challenge lies in the reluctance to adopt modern preservation techniques and architectural designs. Many restoration efforts continue to rely heavily on traditional methods, which, while authentic, are often labor-intensive, time-consuming, and expensive. While traditional approaches are invaluable for maintaining the authenticity of these sites, they may not always meet the demands of modern environmental and economic realities.

Modern architectural solutions and technologies, including sustainable building materials, climate-resilient designs, and energy-efficient systems, are frequently met with resistance from both local communities and policy-makers. Many view these innovations as incompatible with traditional practices or unnecessary for preserving the spiritual essence of temples. This resistance limits the ability to adapt to contemporary challenges, including reduced future maintenance costs and addressing the impacts of climate change.

Furthermore, modern architectural interventions that aim to develop or repurpose historical sites often face backlash from communities that perceive resulting changes as eroding cultural authenticity. This conflict between tradition and innovation makes it difficult to implement holistic preservation strategies that balance historical integrity with modern needs [12].

### 6.3. Socioeconomic and management hurdles

Economic challenges are a pervasive issue in heritage conservation in Mongolia. Limited public and private funding often leave restoration projects incomplete or poorly executed. Many temples rely on donations or ad hoc funding from religious institutions, local communities, or international organizations, which are not always sufficient to address the full scope of preservation needs. Additionally, management inefficiencies and a lack of skilled personnel in heritage conservation further complicate efforts to safeguard these sites.

The absence of long-term preservation strategies exacerbates these issues. Without sustainable management plans, many temples are left vulnerable to decay, neglect, or inappropriate development. Furthermore, the lack of integration between cultural preservation and tourism has resulted in missed opportunities to generate revenue that could support restoration efforts. While tourism could provide much-needed financial resources, poorly managed or excessive tourism can also harm these fragile sites.

### 6.4. The way forward

Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach. Government agencies must prioritize cultural

heritage preservation as a key part of national development and allocate adequate resources to support it. Policies should promote collaboration between local communities, conservation experts, and international organizations to ensure a balanced and inclusive approach.

Raising public awareness about the importance of preserving historical architecture is also critical. Educational programs, cultural festivals, and community-driven initiatives can foster a sense of pride and responsibility among local populations, encouraging them to take an active role in conservation efforts.

At the same time, society and policymakers must embrace modern technologies and architectural innovations to address the practical challenges of preservation. Sustainable materials, digital documentation, and energy-efficient designs can reduce long-term maintenance costs while preserving the historical and spiritual essence of these sites. Encouraging adaptive reuse of temple complexes - including incorporating cultural centers, museums, or community spaces - can also make these sites more relevant and financially viable in the contemporary context.

Balancing tradition with modernity is essential to ensuring the survival of Mongolia's architectural heritage. By addressing societal and governmental challenges, embracing innovation, and fostering a deeper appreciation for cultural heritage, Mongolia can safeguard its temples not only as relics of the past but as living symbols of its cultural identity for future generations [13].

## 7. CONCLUSION

The architectural evolution of Mongolian temples is a profound narrative of adaptation, resilience, and cultural synthesis. These sacred structures have undergone remarkable transformations over the centuries, reflecting Mongolia's deep-rooted spiritual traditions, its interactions with neighboring cultures, and the unique demands of its nomadic way of life. As explored throughout this paper, Mongolian temples stand as both historical artifacts and living embodiments of the nation's identity, bridging the past with the present.

From their origins in the 16th century, influenced by Tibetan Buddhism and Chinese design principles, to their regional adaptations and symbolic elements, the architectural characteristics of Mongolian temples reveal a deep connection between spiritual intent and environmental practicality. These temples, including Uuld Beisiin Khuree, Unstiin Khiid, Zaya Gegeenii Khuree, Amarbayasgalant Monastery, Erdene Zuu Monastery, and Gandan Monastery, exemplify the fusion of structural innovation and cultural expression. The unique ability of Mongolian builders to balance functionality with spiritual symbolism has shaped an architectural legacy that resonates with meaning and beauty.

The comparison with neighboring Tibetan and Chinese architectural traditions further highlights the distinctiveness of Mongolian temples. While borrowing and integrating

elements like stupas and tiered roofs, Mongolian temple architecture evolved into a form that reflects the adaptability required by the nomadic lifestyle and the vast steppe landscape. This evolution underscores the creativity of Mongolian architects in harmonizing external influences with local needs and traditions.

However, the ongoing preservation of these architectural treasures presents challenges in the modern era. Economic limitations, societal neglect, and resistance to modern techniques hinder efforts to sustain these sites for future generations. As this paper emphasizes, the lack of acknowledgment from both society and government exacerbates these issues, threatening the longevity of these culturally significant monuments. The reluctance to embrace contemporary architectural innovations, which could reduce long-term costs and enhance sustainability, further complicates conservation efforts.

Despite these challenges, advancements in digital technologies, sustainable materials, and international collaborations offer new pathways for safeguarding this architectural heritage. Mongolian temples are more than historical structures; they are dynamic symbols of a culture's evolution, reflecting the interplay between tradition and innovation. By embracing a forward-thinking approach to preservation that respects both authenticity and practicality, Mongolia can ensure these temples continue to inspire and educate future generations.

The architectural evolution of Mongolian temples is not just a story of the past—it is a call to action for the present. It highlights the need to balance preservation with progress, maintaining the spiritual and cultural essence of these sites while adapting them for contemporary needs. In doing so, Mongolia can honor its rich heritage and secure the place of its temples as enduring icons of faith, identity, and architectural ingenuity.

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