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Building a 'cultural city': Heritage, identity, and the politics of reconstruction in Bhaktapur, Nepal

Cameron David Warner
Department of Anthropology, Aarhus University, Højbjerg, Denmark

Katherine Hacker
Department of Art History, Visual Art & Theory, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

Manoj Suji
Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Concordia University, Montreal, Quebec, Canada

Line Holm Wahlqvist
Department of Anthropology, Aarhus University, Højbjerg, Denmark

Sara Shneiderman
Department of Anthropology and School of Public Policy & Global Affairs, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

Abstract

Nepal's devastating 2015 earthquakes prompted anxious attention to United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO)-designated World Heritage sites in the Kathmandu Valley and the means and methods for rebuilding damaged monuments and residences. As a value-loaded concept, the debate over 'heritage' today lays bare tensions between the national government and local authorities over the use of foreign experts, building techniques and materials, and the appropriate aesthetics for heritage reconstruction. Drawing upon ethnographic data, archival material, and photo documentation from the city of Bhaktapur – one of the three major urban areas of the Kathmandu valley – we trace how local autonomous political

Corresponding author:
Cameron David Warner, Department of Anthropology, Aarhus University, Moesgaard Alle 20, Højbjerg, 8270, Denmark.
Email: etncw@cas.au.dk

power and heritage management unfolded interdependently over time. By considering contestations over the styles of private houses, public temples and former royal palaces, we show how heritage becomes the site of power struggles between a municipality and the national government, between the locally powerful Newar Indigenous community and the nationally dominant caste Hindu hill elite, between private homeowners and public officials. Our findings build on the values-based approach to heritage studies through a focus on heritage as the material manifestation of community values, but also the site where those values are continually contested.

Keywords
heritage, Indigenous identity, post-disaster reconstruction, community values, political autonomy

Introduction

'You keep the money, and we'll take the responsibility for reconstruction'. In our interview on 30 September 2018, Mayor Sunil Prajapati recalled for us the essence of his famous decision to reject a large grant from the German government to reconstruct Bhaktapur, his earthquake-damaged city. These choices highlight how the post-conflict devolution of political power in Nepal intersected with the 2015 earthquakes to signal a paradigm shift in heritage discourse and practice. Bhaktapur Municipality's self-promotion as a 'cultural city' reveals the power of diverse and contested forms of local agency to negotiate reconstruction outcomes, rather than relying on received frameworks that establish binaries between heritage as an externally imposed value system or a site for decolonial practice.

The 2015 Nepal earthquakes[1] destroyed many of the homes, temples, and palaces that comprise the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) World Heritage section of Bhaktapur, a mediaeval Newar city.[2] The ensuing recovery and reconstruction period dovetailed with a process of state restructuring, implemented by the 2015 constitutional promulgation, a charter that emerged from the peace process after Nepal's 1996–2006 civil conflict (Hutt et al., 2021). While Bhaktapur has long been a locus of Newar cultural authority and autonomy, the process of administrative restructuring that unfolded in tandem with post-earthquake reconstruction shifted unprecedented political power to local municipalities including Bhaktapur Municipality. We follow the impact of that devolution through an investigation of contestations over how to rebuild Bhaktapur's heritage sites. Using an interdisciplinary approach combining empirical data with analysis drawn from anthropology, art history, and heritage studies, we offer a close reading of the debates that unfolded over the styles of public temples and former royal palaces. We show how struggles over the meaning of heritage and its 'ideal' material form embodied power struggles between the Bhaktapur Municipality and the Government of Nepal, as represented by its Department of Archaeology (DoA), and how those struggles articulated with longstanding ethnic politics between the Newar community and the dominant Brahmin and Chhetri groups, who are often described together as the caste Hindu hill elite (Hangen, 2007; Lawoti, 2005). Our findings build on the values-based approach to heritage studies through a focus on heritage as the material manifestation of community values, but

also the site where those values are contested. We argue that in the case of Bhaktapur, debates are not centred on tangible versus intangible heritage, but rather whose material heritage ought to be preserved, how, and why (Geismar, 2015; Hall, 1999).

Locating Bhaktapur: Historical and political contexts

Bhaktapur is a dense city on the eastern side of the Kathmandu Valley, nine miles from Nepal's current capital, Kathmandu. Advantageously situated along the old Nepal–Tibet trade route on a low ridge that parallels the Hanumante River to the south, the city is well-known for its Newar cultural dynamism (Figure 1).

Bhaktapur's urban fabric of multi-storied brick and wood residential buildings, temples, palaces and rest houses open on to public squares that host a range of everyday activities and rituals. Newars, the original inhabitants and majority ethnic group of the Kathmandu Valley, represent 88.27% of the city's population of almost 82,000 (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2011).

Historically, Bhaktapur was an important seat of political power for the mediaeval Malla Kingdom (1200–1769). In 1769, Prithvi Narayan Shah's military conquest signalled the forceable unification of Nepal, creating a centralised Hindu state under the Shah dynasty that lasted until 2008. As Prithvi Narayan Shah of Gorkha selected Kathmandu as his capital, Bhaktapur lost its pre-eminence in the valley. In 1846 Jang Bahadur Rana seized power, assumed the role of Prime Minister, and made the position hereditary, effectively side-lining the Shahs and issuing in a Rana oligarchy that would last until 1951. During this century-long period of autocratic stability, Bhaktapur was reframed as a provincial city with a Rana governor. Even before the devastating earthquake of 1934, which severely damaged large portions of the palatial complex, the architectural transformation of Bhaktapur had begun. In a significant architectural departure from Newar style, Dhir Shamser Rana rebuilt a wing of the royal palace in 1855 to serve as the governor's palace.

The damage to heritage sites following the earthquakes of 2015 highlighted the tensions between these architectural layers and their associated formations of political identity. As efforts to rebuild gained traction, a contestation between Newar cultural nationalism and caste Hindu hill elite visions of the city emerged. The former was exemplified in a 2017 post-election interview with Mayor Sunil Prajapati, who explicitly branded Bhaktapur a 'cultural city'.[3] Although it took on specific meanings at this particular political juncture, this concept was not new, but rather a continuation of the mandate of the Nepal Workers' and Peasants' Party/Nepal Majdoor Kisan (NWPP), a regional political party that split from the National Communist Party in 1975.

Since the introduction of multi-party democracy in 1990, the NWPP has governed Bhaktapur Municipality, promoting Newar culture, history and architecture through social, educational and political awareness, to materialise their political ideology at the local level (Bijukchhen, 2015; Gibson, 2017; Grieve, 2003; Hoftun et al., 1999). In developing Bhaktapur into a 'cultural city', one of NWPP's stated goals has been to revive Malla-period Newar architecture (Arora, 2022). This is a symbolic form of resistance, touted by the NWPP as a means of re-establishing Bhaktapur's autonomy as a Newar polity vis-à-vis the dominant Nepali state.

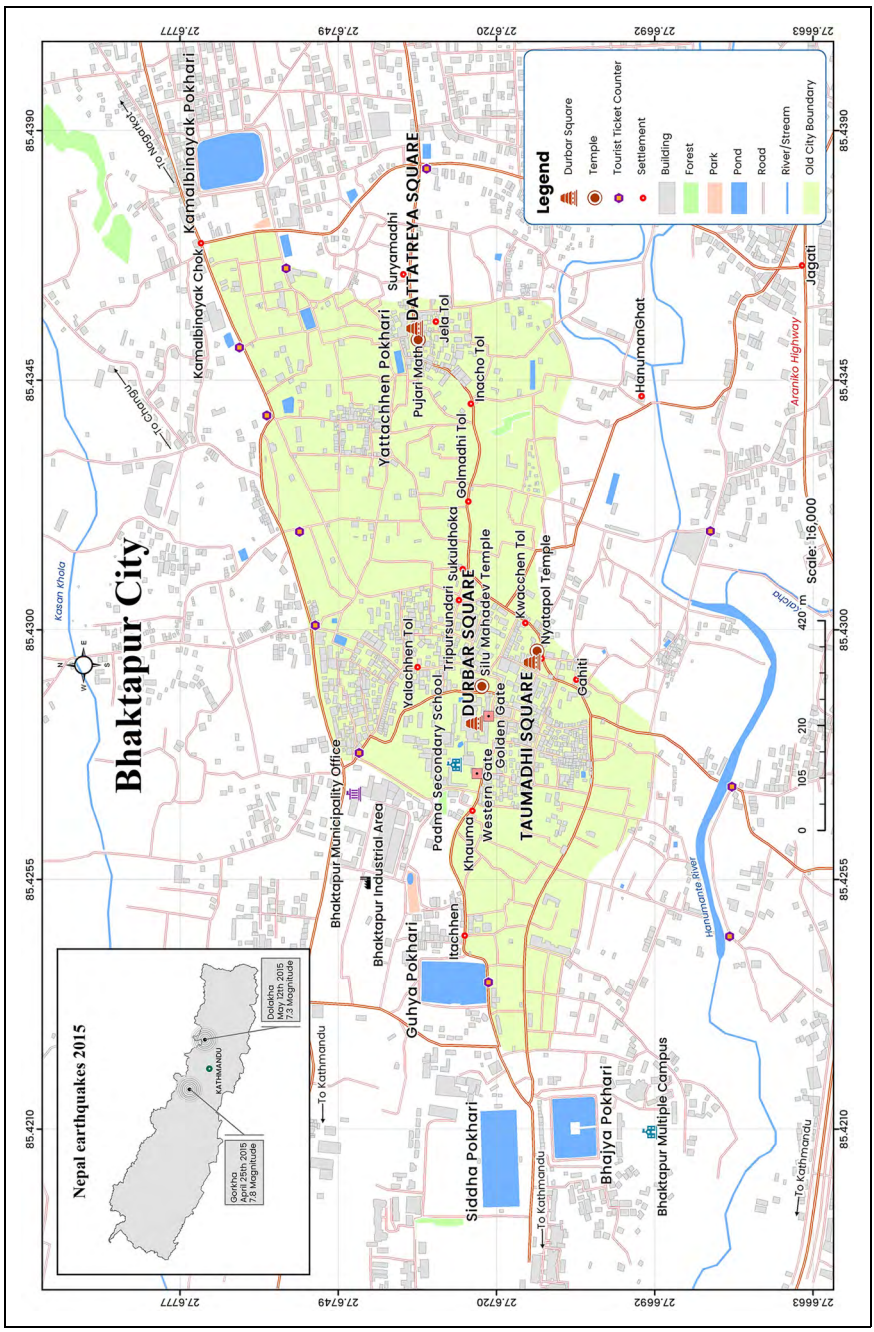

Figure 1. Bhaktapur, by Susmina Manandhar for Naxa.com.np.

These ideological objectives of the NWPP can be read as synonymous with those of the Bhaktapur Municipality, whose post-earthquake architectural and design imperatives we examine below. We suggest that the Newar cultural nationalism driving the 'cultural city' concept was already a longstanding political trope by 2015, but the seismic disaster converged with the process of federal restructuring to create new opportunities for the material assertion of this indigenous resurgence. As such, our arguments bridge broader global conversations about the specific ways in which material culture may be mobilised to assert ethnic consciousness in tangible, structurally visible ways (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2009; Meiu et al., 2020), with those about how disaster may open up the space to reimagine socio-cultural and political structures (Gamburd, 2014; Liechty and Hutt, 2021; Oliver-Smith and Hoffman, 2019; Simpson, 2014). In the case of Bhaktapur, the 2015 earthquakes created an opening for longstanding contestations over heritage and identity to be reframed in infrastructural form through the reconstruction of the built environment.

Methodology

This article emerges from a Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Partnership Development Grant, 'Expertise, Labour and Mobility in Nepal's Post-Conflict, Post-Disaster Reconstruction', which ran from 2017–2022. The original research and arguments presented here draw upon the work of partnership members from multiple disciplines at different points within their personal career trajectories, who were variously trained and employed within North American, European and Asian universities and non-governmental organisation institutional frameworks. Field research was conducted in three phases. In March 2018, the team conducted the first round of field research in the most affected areas of Bhaktapur, including Jela, Inacho, Suryamadhi, Golmadhi and Dattatreya Square (also known as Tachapal). We interviewed individuals (men and women) at the household level with different experiences of negotiation with the reconstruction programme over issues including the Nepal Reconstruction Authority (NRA)'s beneficiary criteria and house designs, property ownership issues within families, and the Municipality's cultural codes (Bhaktapur Municipality, 2015). In the second phase, September–October 2018, the focus was on key individuals, experts, local institutions and government agencies who were closely associated with reconstruction related activities. These included the Mayor, Deputy Mayor, ward chairs, engineers, and officials within the Municipality, especially from the Heritage Section, NRA's district level unit, the DoA, leaders from political parties, contractors responsible for heritage reconstruction, and representatives of banks and financial institutions. From 2019 through 2020, additional follow-up interviews were conducted both at the municipal and federal level with agencies such as NRA and the DoA. Interviews were conducted in Nepali and translated into English. Throughout the research period, we observed interactions at cultural heritage sites under reconstruction, and attended some events related to heritage reconstruction in the Municipality. We also incorporated local media analysis exclusively covering the dynamics of heritage reconstruction, especially the local election of 2022 and Bhaktapur Municipality's agenda for ongoing and future heritage reconstruction programmes. In total, we conducted 59 interviews in Bhaktapur.

Approaches to heritage reconstruction: International, national and local

The management and conservation of the Kathmandu Valley's heritage sites has been conducted according to UNESCO's operational guidelines since 1979. These focus on tangible heritage, emphasising materiality, form and design. The approach is, arguably, the consequence of a Eurocentric heritage discourse that also works to validate the practices reinforced by conservation experts (Smith, 2006), without sufficient attention paid to intangible heritage. This Eurocentric discourse has dominated professional heritage management practices, stressing that heritage must be passed onto future generations *unchanged*. With its roots in the English conservation ethos 'conserve as found', it gives inherent value to physical material (Smith, 2006).

Broad and unstable, the concept of heritage and the discourse around it have evolved in recent decades (Graham and Howard, 2008). Cultural heritage now commonly embraces both the tangible and the intangible. Without these intangible aspects of cultural heritage, tangible objects or properties arguably lose their meaning and value (Hollowell and Nicholas, 2019). In one framing, *all* heritage is, in its essence, intangible: material objects and monuments are of no value in themselves, but become valuable and meaningful *only* by the cultural activities and processes *of which they are a part* (Smith, 2006).

Most emphasis in professional heritage management is still placed on material heritage, which attributes more meaning and value to the physical objects and buildings, than to their use or significance. This focus on physical material from the past creates discontinuity between monuments and buildings from the past, and people, communities, and cultural processes in the present, resulting in physical structures that are often reduced to mere objects of the past with little connection to their users (Logan, 2012; Silva, 2017). Intangible heritage is much more difficult to protect and manage. People and their actions are impossible to 'own' and manage in the way that objects and monuments can be restored or rebuilt (Logan, 2012).

Heritage scholars have long pointed out the problems inherent in imposing European heritage ideologies on non-European peoples, many of whom at one time lost control over their own historiography and cultural patrimony due to imperialism and settler-colonialism (Harrison, 2012). Applying theories about universal value can be perceived as a way of excluding local stakeholders, or communities with an interest in heritage places, in the decision-making processes of heritage management (Byrne, 2008). As a response, UNESCO adapted their management rubric to what heritage and tourism scholar Ioannis Poulios (2010) calls a 'values-based' approach, a shift toward a more representative model of heritage than one that assumes North Atlantic ideas about heritage must be globally applicable. In this model, the significance of a heritage site is determined by the values attributed by the various stakeholder groups. The values-based approach encourages community involvement but does not set terms for this involvement. Reliance on external conservation professionals in key stakeholder groups also weakens the connection between heritage and its community (Harrison, 2012), making a values-based approach even less ideal in a living heritage setting (Poulios, 2010). Our material reveals some of the challenges in implementing the values-based approach in practice.

In Bhaktapur, key stakeholders include the Government of Nepal's DoA, the Bhaktapur Municipality, and the communities which use the heritage sites actively for

religious and cultural practices. But while the values-based approach attempts to give equity to each stakeholder group, in reality the coordination and responsibility tends to reside in the hands of one managing authority, which in Bhaktapur is the Municipality.

On the other hand, the global heritage paradigm embodied by UNESCO is beginning to adjust to these concerns, particularly in urban environments like Bhaktapur.[4] According to Kapila Silva, an expert on UNESCO's World Heritage Program, one of the emerging paradigms considers urban heritage cities to be dynamic living sites, with rituals, festivals and processions, as well as layers of history, social diversity, and contested identities, where inhabitants need sustainable liveability (Silva, 2020). Heritage sites maintain a function over time, where continuity marks both the use of a site by various stakeholders, but also a process of maintenance and the physical presence of a site's communities. Communities are inseparable from heritage sites, but the composition, and the relative status of subgroups, such as various caste and ethnic groups in Bhaktapur, is potentially contested. In that sense, continuity does not imply that things cannot change. Change is in fact an integral element, where the function, space and people adapt to new circumstances, at local, national, and international levels. A living heritage approach to heritage management considers this continuity and focuses on a core community's historical connection with a site. The core community maintains a primary role in conservation and management efforts, with conservation experts and the peripheral communities taking supplementary roles. The traditional management practices of the core community are accepted as the primary ones (Poulios, 2010). While organisations such as UNESCO and ICCROM (International Centre for the Study of Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property) agree that a new approach which goes beyond universal value is needed, there are few clear guidelines on how to implement alternative paradigms. We argue that Bhaktapur is a case in point that demonstrates the need for a nuanced approach to heritage in a dynamic urban environment shaped by rapid political and environmental change.

Local discourses and actors

Heritage (*sampada*) is also a contested concept locally within Bhaktapur Municipality, revealing social tensions and material challenges embedded in unique features of urban life within the UNESCO zone. Language illustrates the complexity of the situation. Different stakeholders – homeowners, municipal officials and heritage activists – use various terms to refer to various types of heritage such as *hamro parampara ra sanskriti* (our tradition and culture), *puratatwik kshetra* (archaeological sites), *sampada kshetra* (heritage sites), *nagar kshetra* (city areas), *nagar bhitra* (within the city), *prachin nagar* (ancient city), *smarak kshetra* (monument zones), *vishwa sampada kshetra* (World Heritage Site), *aitihasik kshetra* (historical sites/areas), *purano nagar kshetra* (old city areas) and 'tourist areas' (term used in English). Although different terms refer to different heritage sites, Bhaktapur Municipality consistently uses the term *sampada* for tangible and intangible heritage, public or private buildings within and beyond World Heritage Sites.

However, *sampada* is a relatively new term in the language of heritage discourse in Nepal. The use of *sampada* is deeply rooted in the temporality of Nepali politics and

regime changes. The NWPP and Bhaktapur Municipality have been using the term since the restoration of democracy in the 1990s. However, before 2006, the term *sampada* did not exist in the government's official documents, including those published by the DoA. For example, the Ancient Monument Preservation Act 2013 (1956 CE) (Government of Nepal, 1956), the Archive Preservation Act 2046 (1989 CE) (Government of Nepal, 1989), and other documents do not use the term *sampada*. Instead, two terms, *prachin smarak* (ancient monuments) and *puratwatik wastu* (archaeological objects), were frequently used to define and explain tangible and intangible heritages. The Ancient Monument Conservation Procedure 2006, for the first time, used the term *sampada* along with *smarak* or *puratwatik wastu* (monuments or archaeological objects). Following this spirit, the 'Basic Guidelines for Preservation and Reconstruction of Earthquake-damaged Properties 2072 (2015 CE)', introduced by the DoA (Department of Archaeology, 2015), not only uses *sampada* interchangeably with *smarak* (monument) but also includes both historical and cultural heritage within the term *sampada*. The concept *sampada* is broadly used in the official language of the Municipality (Bhaktapur Municipality, 2015), and colloquially in Bhaktapur to refer to ancient tangible and intangible, public and private heritage, within and beyond the World Heritage sites (Shneiderman et al., 2023).

To the Municipality, *sampada* is a totality of history, culture, identity and economic logic. Thus, their narratives and discourse of heritage centre around the advocacy of Newar architecture and resistance against the centralised notion of heritage governance. Reconstruction after the 2015 earthquakes created the possibility to return certain heritage sites to an earlier period of Newar architecture through their reconstruction. To achieve this goal, the Municipality lobbied and organised workshops, expert consultation meetings and political awareness programmes to put pressure on the central government and UNESCO to implement its plans. The Municipality's advocacy for heritage preservation focuses on the continuation of Newar architecture. In this case articulations of history and identity not only materialise political ideology at the local level, but also serve as the basis for negotiation of power and autonomy with the central government and UNESCO (Grieve, 2006), as well as foreign donors such as the German government, as will be discussed below.

Foreign expertise, donors, and materials: The Bhaktapur development project

When the DoA proposed a competitive tender to reconstruct Bhaktapur after the 2015 earthquakes, the German KfW Development Bank came forward with a proposal, which the Municipality ultimately rejected in favour of a plan relying on locally formed users' committees (*upabhokta samiti*). German involvement in Bhaktapur had begun decades earlier with the restoration of the sixteenth-century Pujari Math (Hindu Priest's Residence) on Dattatreya Square, also known as Tachapal Tol, completed in 1972 (Amatya, 1988; Gutschow, 1976; Korn, 1977). Its success led to an ambitious urban redevelopment scheme for the whole city, which restored some 200 buildings between 1974 and 1989, installed a sewage system, and upgraded streets. While the Bhaktapur Development Project (BDP), funded by the West German Development Agency, was praised for helping improve the living conditions of Bhaktapur residents (Hachhethu, 2004), it was also met with resistance. In 1979 there was so much discontent

that the project had to be halted and the community consulted. German 'experts' became German 'advisors', and the project assumed a more cooperative approach (Grieve, 2003).

In 1987, Niels Gutschow, one of the four German architects on the Pujari Math restoration project, and architect Götz Hagmüller were asked to select a suitable restoration project in Bhaktapur as an official gift from the German government. They chose the late seventeenth-century Chyasilin Mandap, an octagonal pavilion prominently located in front of the Palace of 55 Windows on Durbar Square, that had been completely destroyed in the 1934 earthquake. The Rana rulers made no attempt to restore it but cleared the rubble away (Gutschow and Hagmüller, 1991). Henry Ambrose Oldfield's watercolours from the 1850s as well as historical photographs made by the French traveller-scholar Gustav Le Bon in 1885 among others provided visual reference materials for reconstruction.

While the rebuilding drew on visual documentation and even recovered and incorporated several parts of the original structure, the project proved controversial for using steel for the first time in Newar architecture (Tiwari, 2016). Moreover, the river-boulder foundation was removed and replaced with a concrete pad; the centre 4 of its 16 wooden pillars were replaced with steel encased in concrete and lime plaster; and steel frames were used instead of the Newar flexible structural system to ensure a seismic-proof structure (Figure 2).

Figure 2. The centre four pillars and steel infrastructure of the Chyasilin Mandap, completed in 1992, with the Malla-period Palace of 55 Windows in the background. Photo: Katherine Hacker.

In contrast with the Chyasilin Mandap, the rebuilding history of the Palace of 55 Windows followed a different trajectory. While the upper floor's gallery of continuous wooden windows completely collapsed during the 1934 earthquake, it was reconstructed by the Ranas utilising new as well as salvaged materials, and roofed with galvanised iron sheets. In the 1960s these sheets were replaced with tiles. The earthquake of 1988 damaged the building further, evident in the displacement of the main facade (Amatya, 2007). In the 1990s, various agencies were involved in conservation strategies for the building; in April 2004 an agreement for the restoration project was signed between the DoA and Bhaktapur Municipality (Amatya, 2007). The Bhaktapur Municipality subsequently vowed to reconstruct the Palace of 55 Windows on Durbar Square with priorities placed on traditional materials and methods, and without international assistance or use of steel and concrete. The restoration of this palace began in 2002 and was completed in 2008 by 'Nepali professionals staying within the Newar architectural, structural, and crafts vocabulary and with Nepali money' (Tiwari, 2016). One of the hallmarks of the project was the contribution of the combined expertise of over 200 senior traditional craftspeople of Bhaktapur (Tiwari, 2017; Weiler and Gutschow, 2017).

After the 2015 earthquakes, the German government presented a proposal to again restore parts of Bhaktapur. The German Development Bank has strict operating procedures such as an insistence on international bidding based on an international tender and preference for the use of modern materials. The German proposal called for restoring Lal Baithak, the neo-classical building on Durbar Square, whereas the Municipality argued for a return to an earlier Malla-period Newar style. This position put the Municipality in conflict with the Government of Nepal (represented by the DoA), which is guided by the 1956 Ancient Monument Preservation Act protecting structures over a hundred years old. The DoA pointed out that the palace, rebuilt by the Ranas in 1855, qualified as protected, and no funds would be provided if it were rebuilt in Newar style. The Municipality agreed and Mayor Prajapati stated: '*Paisa tapai rakhnus, nirmaan ko jimma hami linchhau* – You keep the money, and we'll take the responsibility for reconstruction'. He further stated, 'Their conditions were not acceptable to us as it was demeaning to our *"atmasamman"* (self-respect) … We may take five years to rebuild our heritage sites, so what? We will be rebuilding it by ourselves at least'. The mayor's confidence derived from the local expertise that existed in Bhaktapur, with its two engineering colleges and skilled lineages of craftspeople.

The Municipality's unequivocal decision to reject financial and technical aid resonated in Bhaktapur because of the German Development Bank's long-term, often contentious, involvement in the city, which contributed to a highly polarised debate about materials, technology and expertise for heritage rebuilding in the post-earthquake Kathmandu Valley. It also highlights the multidirectional contestations between different scales of government, as well as external actors. In this case, the Government of Nepal attempted to use its international connections to assert its own hegemonic vision of heritage through the DoA against the Municipality's desires to pursue reconstruction according to its own locally framed vision of heritage as making use of local capacity. Both the DoA and the Municipality claimed ownership over heritage sites that fell within their jurisdiction, and adopted their own, sometimes conflicting, approaches to reconstruction practices. Under the Public Procurement Act (2007), the DoA is required to issue a construction tender for

contractors to bid upon, whereas the Municipality insisted on heritage reconstruction through a users' committee approach, which is incompatible with competitive tenders. These disputes and a series of negotiations delayed the beginning of heritage reconstruction, and once it began, resulted in different sites within the city experiencing vastly disparate approaches.

The significance of Bhaktapur Mayor Prajapati's decision to reject foreign aid is all the more striking when placed within the context of the Kathmandu valley and decisions made by neighbouring cities. Like Bhaktapur, Kathmandu and Patan[5] suffered demonstrable loss and heavy damage to its public buildings but both cities readily accepted foreign aid, albeit under differing circumstances. Rebuilding in Kathmandu did not proceed smoothly. The iconic Kasthamandap, completely destroyed in the 2015 earthquakes, was mired in disagreements between the National Reconstruction Authority, the DoA, the Kathmandu Municipality, and the Campaign to Rebuild Kasthamandap for 3 years. Two high profile projects on historically important buildings – the Gaddi Baithak and Basantapur (the nine-storied palace)—were awarded to the U.S. Government through the Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation (with a contribution of USD 900,000) and the People's Republic of China, respectively. The Gaddi Baithak readily invites comparison with Bhaktapur's Lal Baithak as both are Rana-period palaces and prominently located on their respective Durbar Squares. Some 50 years after the Lal Baithak, the Gaddi Baithak (throne hall) was built in 1908 by Rana Prime Minister Chandra Shamsher with standard neo-classical architectural elements such as pediment and entablature on Ionic columns (Gutschow, 2011). This restoration was criticised by local activists with the SaveNepaValley movement, for what were seen as changes to the main facade.

We detail several such experiences through a series of case studies in the following sections. Throughout, we reference two collections of historical drawings and watercolours that constitute a remarkable visual archive of the nineteenth-century city from Raj Man Singh Chitrakar, a Newar professional artist employed by Brian Houghton Hodgson, the British Resident in Nepal from 1833 to 1843, and Henry Ambrose Oldfield, a doctor with the British Residency from 1850 to 1863. Oldfield's watercolours in particular have assisted conservation architects in restoring sites. In addition to Bhaktapur's Chysalin Mandap cited above, another example is Patan's Thanapati, a long-arcaded structure along the southern edge of Durbar Square, built in 1678 by two ministers of King Srinivasamalla. While the arcade survived the 1934 earthquake, the upper story collapsed. This floor with projecting windows and an octagonal pinnacle was reconstructed in 1995 based on Oldfield's watercolour of 1855 (Dixit, 2008; Gutschow, 2011).

The Royal Palace of 99 Choks and the politics of rebuilding on Durbar Square

A *chok*, or courtyard surrounded by a quadrangle, is the basic building unit for domestic, monastic and palatial architecture in Bhaktapur. Malla palaces are fundamentally Newar-style houses, differing only in scale and replication of this central quadrangular layout. Bhaktapur's royal palace is an accretion of multi-storied quadrangles built over several centuries (Figure 3).

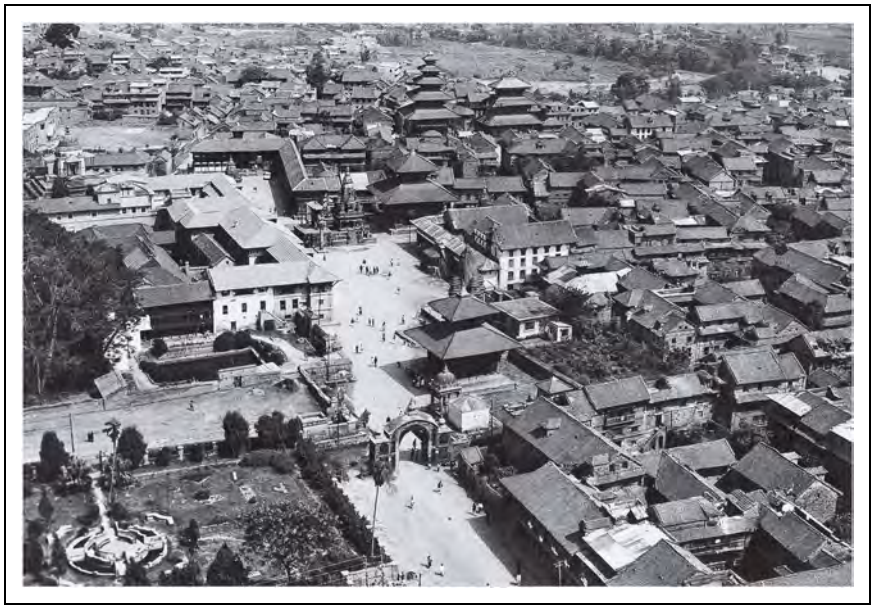

Figure 3. Aerial view of Durbar Square from the northwest, April 1973. Courtesy of Niels Gutschow. The Malla palace complex extended from the Western Gateway to the Silu Mahadev Temple (in Rana-period style with dome) in the northeast. Open spaces to the left of the gate indicate former Malla sites of Vasantapur and Bhandarkhal. The cluster of multi-storied quadrangles include the Mul Chok, Malati Chok and Palace of 55 Windows.

Known locally as the Palace of 99 Choks, Bhaktapur's palace was the largest in the Valley (Hutt, 1994; Slusser, 1982). The relatively modest Malla-period palace we see today reflects little of its former grandeur or vast scale, having been greatly reduced and altered over the centuries, yet this may change with the Bhaktapur Municipality's ambitious concept for the revival of the 99 Choks.

Post-earthquake excavations in the vicinity of Padma Niketan, a school built in 1946 on the site of the former Vasantapur, a pleasure pavilion for Malla queens on the west side of the palace, confirmed the presence of subsurface heritage (Coningham et al., 2019). According to Surya Kharbuja of the Municipality's Heritage Section, there are 'around thirty choks' in this area. The rest are in the Sharada Campus where the Chief District Officer and Police currently have offices. The project to revive the 99 choks is 'a bit challenging' because it entails relocating schools, government buildings, and private houses.[6] Nonetheless, a master plan of this scale and ambition can be interpreted as a profound statement of urbanism that is central to assertions of local, culturally Newar political power. We consider this bold initiative in light of the opportunities for rebuilding on Durbar Square afforded by the 2015 earthquakes combined with political ambition to assert Newar Indigenous identity by remaking Bhaktapur as a particular kind of 'cultural city'. Scholars have provided comprehensive historical overviews as well as plans of the

palace complex (Gutschow, 2011; Hutt, 1994; Korn, 1977; Slusser, 1982) that facilitate thinking critically about the renewal project. Beginning in the early 1600s, Malla rulers left an almost continuous record of constructions, repairs and donations. Palace choks are named, often defining their roles in the palace or deities in residence there. For example, the Mul Chok is the main courtyard with its temples for Taleju, the Malla rulers' tutelary deity, and dates to the fifteen and sixteenth centuries, probably the oldest surviving section of the palace (Gutschow, 2011). The Malati Chok with large stone lions flanking the doorway and the Palace of 55 windows, with its upper floor gallery of continuous wooden windows, was built by Bhupatindra (r. 1696–1722) and faces Durbar Square. The Golden Gate, an offering to goddess Taleju from Bhupatindra's son Ranajit, Bhaktapur's last Malla ruler, is located between these two wings of the palace.

The section of the palace that especially concerns us is known today as the Lal Baithak (audience hall), which became an intense focus of post-earthquake debate and dispute. Yet this building has been surprisingly under-represented in non-Nepali scholarship. On three of the four plans noted above it is not individually identified but rather presented as part of a western wing of the palace. It is not until the appearance of Gutschow's authoritative publication in 2011 that we get a definitive, measured plan of palace and palace square. Furthermore, he calls the Lal Baithak 'the most imposing structure of the palace' (2011: 286). Originally built by Bhupatindramalla, this long two-bayed structure was 'transformed' by Dhir Shamser Rana (1828–1884) in 1855 to serve as the governor's residence (Gutschow, 2011). Dhir Shamser was appointed governor by his elder brother Jang Bahadur Rana and accompanied him to Europe in 1850–1851. Of Bhupatindra's original palace only the 5-bayed arcade with row of pillars remained intact, together with the elaborately carved wooden door at the centre of the wall (Gutschow, 2011).

Raj Man Singh Chitrakar's large pencil drawings from the early 1840s and Henry Ambrose Oldfield's watercolours from only a decade later present us with several of the same views of Durbar Square. Chitrakar's *The Darbar of Bhatgaon*, a detailed overview of the palace on the left and the Lampati (arcaded public building) on the right, demonstrates the stylistic and material harmony between the brick and wood buildings of the Mallas. Specific architectural and sculptural features such as Bhupatindra's large sculptures and Ranajit's Golden Gate align with the built space (Figure 4).

The three-storied palatial wing on the left and the Palace of 55 Windows on the right mirror one another in the progressive increase in fenestration per floor culminating in the most elaborate *sanjhaya*, or projected latticed window, directly below the overhanging roof. The lower portion of roof struts is supported by a projecting cornice of carved wooden elements as well as decorative moulded bricks. A second drawing by Chitrakar focuses on these palatial buildings on either side of the Golden Gate. Oldfield's 1853 watercolour reaffirms that the Malla-period palace was a continuous three-storied brick structure that extended from the Bhandarkhal to the Golden Gate.

Only 5 years later, Henry Ambrose Oldfield produced another watercolour which he labelled *The Durbar, Bhatgaon (restored since previous drawings were made) 1858*. Oldfield's important dated work documents the Rana-initiated architectural features (Figure 5).

Figure 4. Raj Man Singh Chitrakar, The Darbar of Bhatgaon, RAS Hodgson 022.042, courtesy of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland.

Figure 5. Henry Ambrose Oldfield, The Durbar, Bhatgaon (restored since previous drawings were made) 1858 © British Library Board (Shelfmark WD3320, item no. 3320).

Dhir Shamser Rana refashioned the building to showcase a neo-classical vocabulary of shallow pilasters, rounded arches, and evenly spaced rectangular windows with wooden shutters alternating with blind balustrades against a white plastered façade. Two dormer projections from the pitched roof had windows with multiple panes of glass. In contrast with the Mallas' highly elaborate and carved wooden windows, door frames, and roof struts, the Rana building proclaimed a new architectural and political order. The cumulative impact of the Lal Baithak's 'Western' façade dramatically announces what Mark Liechty calls the Ranas' 'appropriation of the power of foreignness' (Liechty, 1997).

Today, the Lal Baithak retains much of the mid-nineteenth-century façade represented in Oldfield's watercolour and its greater building height, wall and window treatments dramatically separate it from the surrounding Malla-period structures. The Lal Baithak took on new life in 1960 when it and the adjacent wing were repurposed as the National Art Museum. The museum was damaged in the 2015 earthquakes, and almost a decade later, the Lal Baithak's rebuilding remains in a state of limbo (Figure 6).

As noted earlier, in the aftermath of the earthquakes the German proposal called for restoring the building from the Rana period. However, the Local Government Operation Act of 2017 allowed for municipalities to make and implement certain rules,

Figure 6. Overview of Durbar square and palace complex with the Malla-period palace (on the left) and Rana-period Lal Baithak shored up with wooden supports, January 2016. Photo: Katherine Hacker.

including those for heritage reconstruction. With a renewed sense of political autonomy, Bhaktapur Municipality argued for a return to the earlier Malla-period Newar style. The elevation drawings by Newar artist Raj Man Singh Chitrakar and watercolours by Oldfield have the potential to serve as useful visual aids as the Municipality moves forward with their plan to rebuild this palatial building in Newar architectural style.

Conflicting mandates for temple reconstruction

The Silu Mahadev temple on the eastern end of Durbar Square was totally destroyed in the great Bihar–Nepal Earthquake of 1934, rebuilt, and then destroyed again in the 2015 earthquakes. As such, a case study of Silu Mahadev presents an opportunity to probe the ways in which religious structures were reconstructed after these two natural disasters in relation to various interests that intersect through the discourses and practices associated with heritage.

Dating ca. mid-seventeenth century, the Silu Mahadev, also known as Fasi Dega, was built in the *shikhara* style with a single tapering tower over a square sanctum. The label *shikhara*, or 'mountain peak' aptly describes their defining curvilinear towers. Constructed entirely of brick or stone, these temples stand in contrast with timber and brick multi-roofed temples. What distinguished the Silu Mahadev from other Hindu temples was its placement atop a massive five-tiered brick platform punctuated by three pairs of monumental stone animals placed along its steep southern staircase. Visual documentation provided in nineteenth-century paintings as well as extant remains of other temples in the immediate vicinity indicate that the Silu Mahadev was a commanding focal point anchoring the eastern precinct of Durbar Square. After the 1934 earthquake, the pyramidal base was all that remained until the Ranas rebuilt the Silu Mahadev directly on top of the surviving high plinth. They maintained the square footprint of the temple, but rather than following traditional Malla practice of rebuilding as before, the Ranas replaced the towering superstructure with a shallow *gumbaz* or dome thereby greatly diminishing the temple's height and altering its profile (see Figure 3). Tiwari writes that temples were given a domical roof in post-1934 earthquake rebuilding 'more as an expediency in construction than from an urge for a new style' (Tiwari, 2009: 179).

We argue instead that the Ranas chose an architectural repertoire that deliberately signalled modernity, 'foreignness', and caste Hindu hill elite hegemony. This pronounced architectural shift also marked the Ranas' claim of sovereignty over the site, while simultaneously disrupting the architectural integrity and display of the Newar Mallas. The domed Kalamochan temple on the banks of the Bagmati river, built in 1874 by Jang Bahadur, makes their intent clear: the temple is built in the 'foreign style' or *desi kaida* (Tiwari, 2009). Domes were very popular with the Ranas as were neo-classical architectural features noted earlier. Moreover, the exterior walls of Rana-built temples, like palatial structures, were typically finished in stucco plaster and whitewashed in sharp contrast with the red brick and wood associated with Newar religious, palatial and domestic architecture.

The historical overview above provides essential context for understanding the debate that ensued around the rebuilding of the Silu Mahadev after the 2015 earthquakes. The Bhaktapur Municipality's decision to rebuild the Silu Mahadev as a shikhara temple once again placed the Municipality at odds with the DoA, who are empowered to

protect the country's cultural heritage. Dr Suresh Shrestha, Chief Archaeology Officer of the DoA, elaborated on this in an interview by pointing out that Nepal has entered into a covenant with UNESCO to preserve its cultural property in the same form and design without losing its essence. This would apply equally to heritage monuments and temples built after the Malla period. Describing these, Shrestha explained, 'Most of them are already one-hundred years old now and already have their cultural and historical essence' (*sanskriti ra aitihasik mahatwa*). However, the DoA's position on the Silu Mahadev is not based on its age. Rather, they recognise the post-1934 temple as worthy of preservation (and re-creation) in order to acknowledge Rana-period contributions to the storied architectural history of Bhaktapur. Shrestha sees a return to the Newar shikhara style in this instance as failing to equally recognise and value the lived memory of the Rana period, breaking the pledge Nepal made with UNESCO when the Kathmandu Valley sites were placed on the UNESCO world heritage list in 1979. For UNESCO,

> The systematic removal of 19th-century Rana-style and early 20th-century neo-classical-style buildings and their replacement with Malla-style buildings (considered locally as proper Newari buildings) fails to recognize…the effect that their removal has on the integrity and authenticity of the property (UNESCO, 2017: 7).

Contra UNESCO and the DoA, Rana period architecture is not perceived by the ruling Newar NWPP as authentic, but more as a discontinuity in their history; something they actively want to remove as they continue to use their democratic mandate to reassert Newar cultural autonomy and authority in Bhaktapur. As Bhaktapur historian Om Dhaubhadel explained, 'The earthquakes were definitely unfortunate, but they also gave us an opportunity to restore our heritage to their original designs'. Rana buildings may represent shame or pain in Newar communal history, weakening their attachment to the structures and place (Harrison, 2010). If the Lal Baithak, the Silu Mahadev, and other structures rebuilt in Rana style, symbolise a difficult period for Newari people, then rebuilding these to their original state can be viewed as a part of their communal healing. In this context, 'the destruction of heritage might be understood not as the opposite of heritage', but 'as part of the same process of remembering and forgetting or re-authoring the past in the present' (Harrison, 2010: 169). Dhaubhadel also acknowledged the difficulties of recreating pre-Rana heritage now, 'It is also very hard to accurately restore them to their previous state. We only have vague images of their designs so the best we can do is estimate, sometimes by their location and sometimes by the time they were built in' (Aryal, 2019). Authenticity and material integrity remain the stalwart criteria of UNESCO. The DoA has acknowledged that nineteenth-century paintings exist but questioned if this is 'proper evidence'. 'Can we rely on the paintings?' asked Shrestha in an interview.

Oldfield's *Temple of Mahadeo, Bhatgaon (Nepal)*, March 1853 provides a richly detailed overview of the eastern precinct of Durbar Square (Figure 7). The viewer looks north towards the focal point of the painting, Silu Mahadev, shown in disrepair. A section of the lower plinth has broken away and there is a pile of rubble on the upper tier. The temple itself appears similarly neglected with vegetation growing out of the tower and two of the four small upper shrines, or *kutas*, over the doorways

Figure 7. Henry Ambrose Oldfield, *Temple of Mahadeo, Bhatgaon (Nepal) March 1853*, © British Library Board (Shelfmark WD2837, item no. 2837).

nearing collapse, are shorn up with wooden supports. While perhaps evidence of damage from the 1833 earthquake, some local authorities see in these paintings the loss of political autonomy in the nineteenth century, which officials aim to reclaim today through temple style. For example, journalist Kanak Mani Dixit asserts that by the time of Oldfield's 1853 painting, Bhaktapur 'had indeed become physically debilitated – a result of the loss of community and nobility-related patronage following the decades of rule by the Shah dynasty of Gorkha' (Dixit, 2008: 372).

During Bhaktapur's local elections in 2017, conservation and restoration of religious and cultural heritage sites were pitched as the primary election agenda. A total of Rs. 230 million was allocated by the Municipality for the conservation of heritage sites, with half of the budget for restoring temples (New Republica 11/06/2019). Mayor Sunil Prajapati told us that the Municipality has invested heavily in the Khwopa Engineering College for research and training in traditional temple and house building techniques.

A large billboard posted on the base of the Silu Mahadev in 2016 effectively announced the reconstruction plan, or *purnanirman yojana*, of this temple in shikhara style. Flanked by 'Before Earthquake' and 'After Earthquake' photographs, the central image featured the proposed elevation of the temple with its tall, tapering tower and its four entrances (Figure 8). By the time of our last visit to Bhaktapur in 2022, the temple was not yet completed, although a Bhaktapur tourism official informed us that it would be ready for reconsecration over the coming year.[7]

Figure 8. Billboard on the remaining tiered plinth of the Silu Mahadev as public announcement for rebuilding the destroyed temple in shikhara style. Photo: Katherine Hacker.

Once again the largest temple on Durbar Square, the new Silu Mahadev stands monument to the material reassertion of Newar cultural power in Bhaktapur. Its façade resembles extant seventeenth-century shikhara temples; however, its infrastructure utilises a four-post system called the boxed column, considered stronger than a single post (Figure 9). Recommended by engineers, this system is intended to make the building more resilient during earthquakes. These construction decisions for the Silu Mahadev also reveal the ongoing debate in the Kathmandu Valley between traditional knowledge and modern best practices.

The rebuilt temple departs significantly from the billboard elevation as well as Oldfield's watercolour in its overall profile and large shrines above the doorways. Yet a wealth of architectural examples are available in Bhaktapur. On Durbar Square alone there are six extant shikhara temples but it is the brick Mahadev temple on the western side of the square that is most similar with its cruciform plan and four porticos. Comparing the ratio of porticos to superstructure, the scale of porticos compliments the overall temple and contributes to its upward thrust as a 'mountain peak', whereas the very large porticos on the rebuilt Silu Mahadev weigh the building down by their prominence. The curvature of the tower itself appears a bit truncated, ending abruptly to be capped by the large finial. Returning to Oldfield's watercolour, the tower maintains a slender, inward curving profile right up to the concluding finial. Even the height of the shrines is suggested by the small terracotta figures affixed to three sides of the tower. Rather than a slavish copy, the new Silu Mahadev temple signals a continuous

Figure 9. The Silu Mahadev temple rebuilt after the 2015 earthquakes by the Bhaktapur Municipality, June 2022. Photo: Sara Shneiderman.

development of the shikhara style, the use of traditional materials, and exemplary traditional craftsmanship found in Bhaktapur. By placing the twenty-first century shikhara temple alongside its sixteenth- and seventeenth-century counterparts, this political project reimagines Newar historical and architectural continuity in concert with the erasure or 'systematic removal' (UNESCO, 2017) of Rana history and its architectural contributions in Bhaktapur.

In conclusion, the new Silu Mahadev is arguably a show of strength – a physical manifestation of newly empowered Newar ethnic consciousness and cultural autonomy, materialised in a highly visible way. It is unclear, however to what extent and in what way the new temple will be embraced by the community. With the exception of the late fifteenth-century Yaksheshvara temple, few of the temples on Durbar Square are actively used by worshippers today (Gutschow, 2011). The Silu Mahadev was one of these temples that, before the earthquake, was no longer attended by a priest for daily worship. The Bhaktapur tourism official's statement about the temple's upcoming 'reconsecration' – a ceremony to re-establish the life force of the deity within a living temple – invites speculation on whether the rehabilitation of this neglected eastern precinct will remain primarily a political project of the Municipality, or whether locals will actually use the temple for religious purposes.

Between users' committees, guthis, and contractors

In the post-disaster context, heritage reconstruction became an even more sensitive issue as concerns over authenticity came forward. By working through users' committees the

Municipality aimed to instill a sense of ownership (*apanatwa*) and self-confidence (*atma-bishwas*) toward heritage reconstruction, while also achieving goals of authenticity.[8] The Municipality viewed outside contractors as profit-makers, devoid of transparency, and without a sense of ownership towards Bhaktapur's history, tangible and intangible heritage. Moreover, the Municipality also questioned the quality of contractor-led reconstruction work. On 16 January 2020, in his speech on the 22nd Earthquake Safety Day, Mayor Prajapati reiterated the importance of users' committees in heritage reconstruction: 'We trust local people more than contractors. Our heritage sites are under construction through *upabhokta samiti* (users' committees), which are formed by the community. Heritage reconstruction by *upabhokta samiti* not only ensures the traditional originality, quality, and ownership over the heritage sites, but also creates employment opportunities for local people'.[9]

Furthermore, the Municipality considered users' committees to be cost-effective. They told us that in a contract system, the cost of reconstruction is usually higher (approximately 40%) than the actual cost due to overhead and deliberate cost inflation by contractors. Echoing the Mayor's position, a senior engineer at the Heritage Section of the Municipality argued that users' committees are not only an economically sound choice but work to create a feeling of ownership. He gave an example of the renovation of Nyatapol Temple in Taumadhi Square, where the users' committees needed <50% of the budget estimated by the Municipality. Community members donated nearly one-fourth of the total budget and users' committees returned the remaining budget to the Municipality.

In Bhaktapur, most of the heritage sites have been reconstructed through users' committees and community members and other social organisations such as local *guthis* took part in this process either by contributing cash or free labour.[10] Historically, local *guthis* are social institutions within the Newar community; they are formed around specific caste and kinship groups who perform cultural, religious, and ritual (death) ceremonies. Their members are bound up by specific roles and obligations (Regmi, 1999 [1977]: 48; Toffin, 2007). In this context, people's sentiment toward heritage sites derives from religious and political interests, sometimes encouraged by political parties.

However, the relationship between the older local *guthis*, the *Guthi Sansthan* (Guthi Corporation), and the users' committees is complicated in heritage reconstruction. Broadly speaking, two types of *guthis* exist in the Kathmandu Valley: local *guthis* and the central *Guthi Sansthan*, managed by the government. The latter was established in 1964 and nationalised in 1967. The *Guthi Sansthan* governs multi-caste *guthis* that carry out daily ritual functions, as well as the maintenance of temples and monasteries from income of the *guthi's* land endowment or the state's direct finance.

However, over the years governance of all tangible heritage came under the DoA, which diminished the role of the *Guthi Sansthan* (Sengupta, 2022). As such, this centralised body was completely invisible in the post-earthquake reconstruction of damaged heritage, such as temples and *sattals* (public resting places) in Bhaktapur. The Municipality argued that the *Guthi Sansthan* was no longer interested in heritage reconstruction due to the technical and financial challenges; they simply continued their daily religious activities and festival processions (*jatras*). In the Municipality's perspective, the highly politicised *Guthi Sansthan* (Sengupta, 2022) remained passive in heritage reconstruction because its officials came from outside of the Kathmandu Valley and were

mainly hill Brahmin and Chhetri who had no attachment to the historical and cultural monuments of the Newar community. Therefore, the Municipality took the leadership role in the reconstruction of the damaged temples, *sattals*, and other heritage sites through *upabhokta samiti*, with local *guthis* also supporting the Municipality's road map for reconstruction through contributing cash and free labour.

After a landslide re-election victory for the NWPP in the 2022 local election, returning Mayor Prajapati stated that renovation and excavation of several heritage sites were among his top priorities for the next 5 years. The NWPP's manifesto promised to mobilise experts to educate school children about art, culture and heritage in order to transfer knowledge to a new generation, as well as provide financial aid to revive endangered art and culture (Sangroula, 2022). The manifesto also emphasised the sustainability and suitability of traditional houses, which are built by skilled masons and carpenters using wood, stone, brick and mud appropriate to the climate of the Kathmandu valley. Reuse of local stones and bricks, rather than imported internationally used materials, also featured in the manifesto (Online Majdoor, 2022; ReportersNepal, 2022).

With these plans, the NWPP continues to advance its vision of Bhaktapur as a 'cultural city'. However, the Municipality was not always able to achieve these goals due to the complex array of actors invested in the ongoing process of reconstruction and their varying visions of the future. For example, while reconstruction of the Lal Baithak was a stated priority even in the 2017 election, by 2022 it was clear that this process was stalled due to political contestation. Instead of the archaeological excavations that would have been required to advance the Municipality's desire to rebuild the 99 Choks, we observed that the Padma School was in fact expanding with new buildings atop the presumed location of archaeologically relevant heritage sites. Tourism officials indicated that there was no timeline for either the excavations or the reconstruction of Lal Baithak due to the political impasse.

Analytically, though the Municipality continually refers to the Malla period as authentically Newar, both in terms of materials and style, we see authenticity as processual and interdependent with local, national and global discourses. Likewise, the 'cultural city' concept should be viewed as diachronic, unfolding in relation to a plethora of influences. We acknowledge the 'cultural city' as a political project of a particular set of actors whom we refer to as Bhaktapur Municipality. Rather than offering a birds-eye, comprehensive view of all perspectives, here we have intentionally emphasised the Municipality's point of view to highlight how the devolution of political power in Nepal to the local level has had real material effects on the post-disaster built environment, as well as for the assertion of ethnic identity in material terms.

Conclusion

We hope that the evidence presented in this article will serve as an archive going forward, which documents the specific ways in which the post-earthquake reconstruction process contributed to the ever-changing infrastructural and cultural configuration between the city of Bhaktapur, its people, and the various scales of governance in which it is embedded. We analysed how the intersections between identity, heritage and political autonomy play out through material manifestations in a post-disaster space. We demonstrated how

overwhelming democratic support at the local level resulted in the Municipality rejecting both national and international interventions in heritage management. The example of Bhaktapur after the 2015 earthquakes also speaks to the timescales at stake in heritage politics. Bhaktapur Newars are not *only* replacing what was destroyed in the last earthquake, but also taking advantage of present material and political openings to replace heritage lost more than 175 years prior.[11] Their strategy relies on a targeted use of resources, carefully worded speech acts, and confidence in material evidence of the past lying beneath their feet. Finally, the case of Bhaktapur as a cultural city does not fit neatly into dichotomous frames of material versus intangible heritage or world versus national cultural patrimony. Bhaktapur Newars endeavour to preserve centuries old construction techniques through manifesting their *municipal* political autonomy via tangible materials *and* intangible practices centuries old.

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ORCID iDs

Cameron David Warner https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0160-1265
Katherine Hacker https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2502-264X
Manoj Suji https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5778-6874
Line Holm Wahlqvist https://orcid.org/0009-0006-9010-0102
Sara Shneiderman https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1584-6044

Notes

1. For detailed accounts of the earthquakes and their effects in Bhaktapur (see Raj and Gautam, 2015; Arora, 2020; Suji et al., 2020).
2. 'Bhaktapur' refers to both a district and a municipality. Here we use 'Bhaktapur' when referring to the historical cultural zone in general, and 'Bhaktapur Municipality' when referring to the specific contemporary jurisdiction in which our research was conducted. The Newar are one of Nepal's approximately 60 recognized *Adivasi Janajati*, or Indigenous Nationalities. They maintain relatively high socioeconomic status and political influence relative to most other indigenous communities in Nepal. Their language and distinctive cultural practices provide powerful foundations for a distinctive identity and associated claims upon the state.
3. 'Prajapati elected Bhaktapur mayor', https://myrepublica.nagariknetwork.com/news/20691/
4. For a recent review on the interrelation between disaster prevention and heritage management, and the 'entangled realities' of local and global operations (see Arora, 2021).
5. In Patan, the Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust, founded in 1991, coordinated rebuilding on Patan's Durbar Square. A fall 2017 funding appeal for KVPT's Earthquake Response Campaign was highly successful with contributions from an extensive number of international donors: the British and Japanese Embassies, the Federal Republic of Germany, the U.S. Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation, as well as The World Monuments Fund (WMF), the Prince Claus Fund for Culture and Development, and Gerda Henkel Foundation, among others.
6. Interview with Surya Kharbuja, 24 August 2021, Bhaktapur.
7. Interview with Rajesh Joshi, 27 June 2022.
8. For a broader discussion of the politics of users' committees in other infrastructural contexts in Nepal (see Rankin et al., 2024).
9. Mayor's speech on 22nd Earthquake Safety Day, 16 January 2020, Bhaktapur Durbar Square.
10. Other sites in the Bhaktapur vicinity, such as Madhyapur Thimi, found similar patterns of user groups functioning as *guthis*, but sometimes with more involvement from the Guthi Sansthan or the DoA than in our fieldsite (Sharma et al., 2022; Ram and Shen, 2023).
11. While we are aware of the growing 'dark archaeology' argument that counters heritage preservation, its contours lie outside of our ethnography, which follows the statements and actions of Bhaktapur Municipality (DeSilvey, 2017; Holtorf, 2018; Geismar et al., 2022).

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