

The artificial life of heritage

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Afb. 1. Patan Durbar Square in 1915.

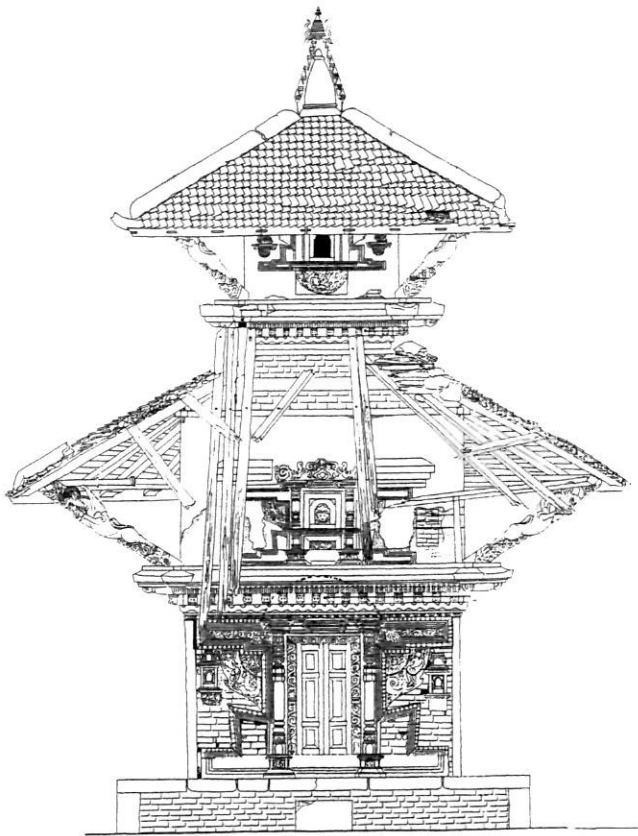
Walking into Darbar Square in Patan for the first time is like entering a fairy tale, a theatre where the visitor is confronted with an undisturbed scene from the Eastern Middle Ages. Patan is one of the three ancient royal cities in the Kathmandu Valley in Nepal. Many tourists have discovered these cities, but you try to ignore them. The modern world seems far away in the Royal Square in Patan and that contributes to the sense of mystery. The fairy tale loses a bit of its enchantment, however, when we read in the guidebook that none of the buildings in the square is older than the seventeenth century. As if to console the reader, the guidebook says that the building traditions on which the architecture of the square is based, are age old. But after a few pages the

dream is once again disturbed when we come to learn that much of what we are looking at was reconstructed after the earthquake of 1934.

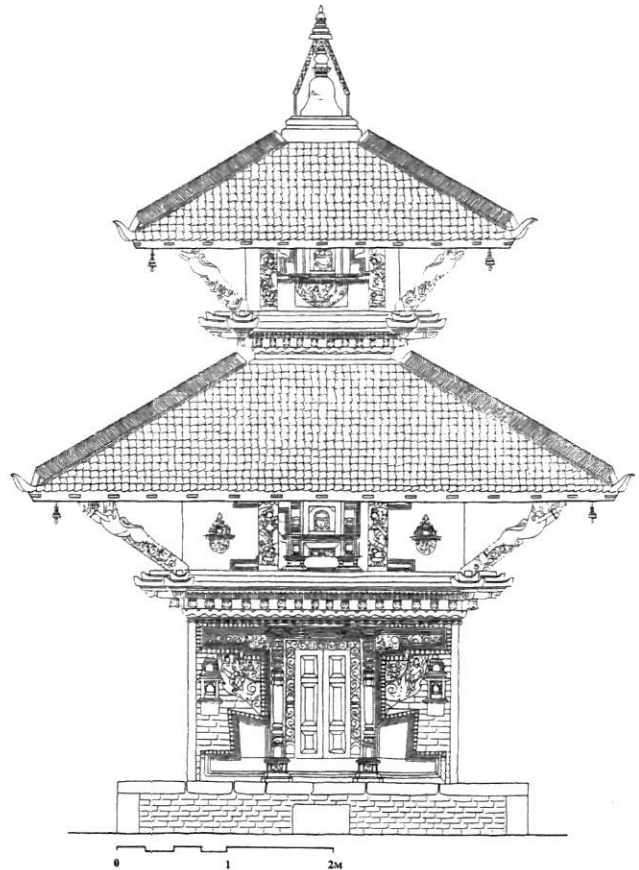
This newly acquired historical knowledge may have disrupted our first impressions of the square, but the strange and overwhelming architecture of the place continues to enchant the visitor. And besides, nobody likes to have his dreams disrupted.

Living culture

The tourist turns to the royal palace on the Darbar Square in Patan and enters through the Golden Door. There he remarks



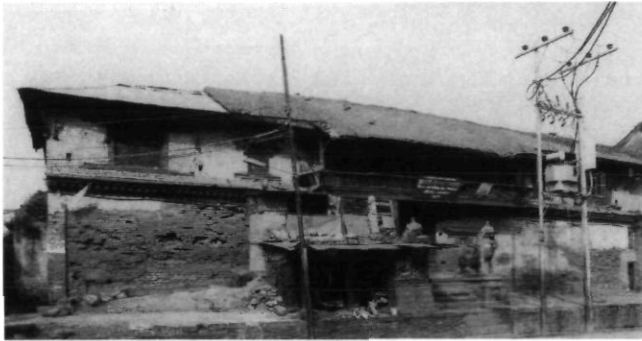
Afb. 2. The Sulima Ramesvara pagoda (thirteenth century) in Patan before restoration.



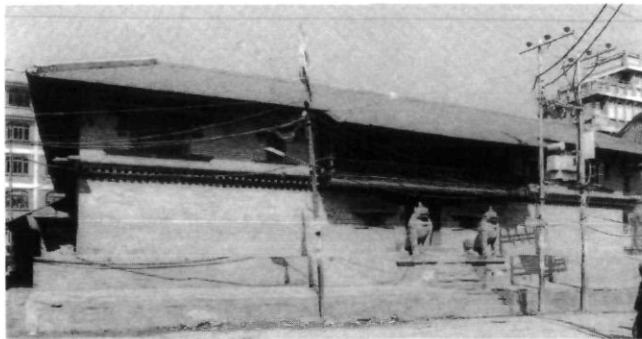
Afb. 3. Proposal for the restoration of the Sulima Ramesvara pagoda (1998).

that the fairy-tale is suddenly being told in another language. The enchanting story has been resumed by someone who speaks differently and this different voice is that of the architect who restored the palace and turned it into a museum between 1983 and 1997. In the Patan Museum, we see the East as most tourists would like to see it: a picturesque scene from the past, polished and refined, without the visual noise from everyday life, which one can hardly escape outside the museum. In the quiet atmosphere of the museum the sculptures are displayed as works of art, not in the way they function in everyday religious practice. Every museum creates a specific distance between the present and the past, between everyday life and the sophisticated corridors of taste en culture. In the temples the statues represent the gods and the worshippers rouse them from their dreams by the sound of the bells in front of their shrines. In these temples the past is not yet detached from the present, but subservient to the needs of daily worship. The historical value of the statues is of secondary importance for the worshippers. For the tourist the historical value comes first, unless he or she takes an anthropological interest in living religious practices and their

actual visual expressions. Our educated tourist deplores these expressions of the living culture, because they diminish the historical significance of the monuments. In his eyes modernized temples have not benefited from the expert surveillance which responsible institutions can give. Modern deviations from building traditions are a slap in the face for our tourist and also for professional institutions. In 1980 the Shrine of Kal Bhairab, built in 1660 on the Darbar Square in Kathmandu, was embellished by a marble facing, much to the disappointment of the specialists of UNESCO and ICOMOS. The use of this material was condemned by them, because it 'disrupted the architectural fabric of the Darbar Square'.¹ The opposition of the educated tourist and the foreign specialists to modern manifestations of affection towards the gods of the temple is the unescapable consequence of the wish to protect historical values. It is the same old story: protection means obstructing development, or at least slowing down the rate of change and that is not readily acceptable to the people who want to modernize their environment. Only tourists and specialists deplore modern additions to historical architecture: their dream may be



Afb. 4. The Buddhist monastery Ibaha Bahi in Patan before restoration (1990).



Afb. 5. Ibaha Bahi in Patan after restoration (1995).

shattered.

The fact that a small group of specialists tries to protect historical architecture against the wishes of the majority, is not very strange. This has been the normal situation in most European countries: protective measures have met with more resistance than support from the general public. The care of monuments has never been a generally accepted cultural phenomenon. It has always been forced upon a majority by a cultural elite, which had the power to get some support from government. Even now, contemporary architecture is much more valued in most European cities than historical architecture, for new architecture expresses flourishing entrepreneurship and old buildings only nostalgic feelings.² The famous architect Rem Koolhaas claims that people do not need history or identity: 'Regret about history's absence is a tiresome reflex', he writes. And he explains that historic cities are turned into caricatures of themselves by the tourist industry. More and more people visit the old centres, like 'an avalanche that, in a perpetual quest for 'character', grinds successful identities down to meaningless dust'.³ This complaint is often voiced by people who think that tourists destroy the reality of the site, which they do to a certain extent, but how could it be otherwise? Koolhaas prefers to reject the artificial life of old cities and many follow him in this respect.

The Darbar Square in Patan is a beautiful and enchanting place, in which the architecture will hopefully not change significantly anymore. The picture is more or less frozen and if the tourist wants to see the living culture of Nepal, he has to leave the protected area and enter the ordinary world, where the living culture is allowed to change and eventually to annihilate a substantial part of the historical values.

Imported knowledge

The care of old buildings is always something artificial and restorations or reconstructions always reveal the spirit of the restorers. And that is what you immediately feel when you enter the Patan Museum. The interior and the garden behind the museum represent Western ideas. When one climbs the stair to the exposition rooms on the first floor, one hears the soft tones of a chime, and these tones evoke the mystical atmosphere the tourist associates with the East. Chimes are not common in Nepal, as the architect told me, but they nevertheless convey the spirit of the old works of art one is going to admire. The restoration of the buildings themselves is a paragon of responsible architectural behaviour, but the newly designed interior has more in common with the refined taste of Italy than with Nepalese traditions. The architect, Götz Hagmüller, is an Austrian and the restoration reflects his European background, not only in his designs, but also and even more in his professional attitude. He has for instance abstained from colouring the facades of the old palace, because there is no proof that the brickwork and the woodwork of this eighteenth century building were originally painted. The trouble is that the adjacent building, which is not yet restored, shows red paint on the brickwork and black paint on the woodwork. He would have used paint in the same way, he told me, if there had been enough evidence that the paint was original. But there is no proof, and he refused to do something irresponsible. This kind of responsible behaviour betrays the influence of Western attitudes. During and after the restoration he had to be on his guard against criticism from experts who might blame him for violating the Charter of Venice. This is understandable since the museum is part of the World Heritage Site of UNESCO. Götz Hagmüller had good reasons for not following the international guidelines in every respect, and he even explained them in the periodical *Architektur Aktuell*.

Restorations nearly always betray the background of the architect in charge. The architect who restored the royal palace (Hanuman Dhoka) in Kathmandu, John Sanday, relates in his guidebook that during the restoration more than fifty girls had been given the task of removing the sometimes more than eight layers of paint on the woodcarvings. The restoration was supervised by the Department of Archaeology of Nepal in collaboration with UNESCO, and the experts had discovered some original carvings which bore no trace of paint. That discovery determined the course of the work. Writing about one of the towers of the palace, the Basantapur Tower, John Sanday declares: 'It is hard now to believe that every square centimetre of it was once covered in paint.'⁴

Removing paint in order to reveal the original appearance of the building most likely reflects a professional approach. The conviction that the original appearance should be the ultimate goal at the expense of later alterations, has been developed in a world where the study of architectural history has produced specialists who are capable of making historically correct reconstructions. These kinds of specialists have nearly always been influenced by Western or Japanese attitudes. Especially in the West, the desire to recreate the original appearance became a threat to the authenticity of historic architecture, that is to say, a threat to the state of the building before restoration, as it came down to us through the course of history. This threat provoked the charters of ICOMOS. Take for instance article eleven of the Charter of Venice of 1964: 'The valid contributions of all periods to the building of a monument must be respected, since unity of style is not the aim of a restoration'. The statement was not unnecessary at the time, and it still has its value within the bounds of sound reasoning. The article contains a general principle, no legal judgement: it asks simply that the visible traces of the past are not to be destroyed by a merciless reconstruction of the original appearance. The statement was necessary in Europe and it still is.⁵

There is no reason to condemn the influence of the West on the culture of Nepal. To do that would be absurd in today's world. The influence of UNESCO on the management of its World Heritage Sites in the Kathmandu Valley is a fact of everyday international life. The international community wants these monumental areas to be protected and this gives the areas a special position, isolated in a way from ordinary life. The gap between this special position, which was invented in the West, and the local traditions is already considerable, but it may have become too wide in the case of the removal of the paint at the Hanuman Dhoka Palace. Many old temples in the Kathmandu Valley are still covered with colours and no one knows how old these are. What could have been the reason to destroy the layers of paint other than the imported and contestable assumption that the origin represents a higher value than the authentic?

Artificial culture

All efforts to reduce the speed of change are artificial and it is obvious that historic architecture can hardly survive without such efforts. But it makes some difference who directs the efforts. Restorations in Nepal seem to a certain extent projections of Western ideas about the East. Perhaps this cannot always be avoided, but sometimes the ideas are based on myths. In his guidebook John Sanday writes that 'concern for periods and datable styles may, in the case of Nepali architecture, become irrelevant because here the art is expressed in a traditional form as opposed to an individual form'. This calls to mind the way in which Gothic architecture was interpreted by people like Eugène Viollet-le-Duc and William Lethaby, namely as the expression of a collective spirit. This interpretation turned out to be nothing other than a projection

of a Romantic longing for a return to the feudal society of the Middle Ages in which everyone would have his well-defined place. 'It would be hard to devise a more misleading interpretation of Gothic', wrote David Watkin and he pointed out how this 'collectivist and anti-intellectual' view of Gothic architecture contributed to the totalitarian aspects of modernism.⁶

The statement that the culture of Nepal is traditional, that it lacks the kind of stylistic developments we know in the West, could be a projection of Western ideas on the East. The opinion of John Sanday that the 'vitality' of the art of Nepal does not consist 'in the development of personal expression', but 'in the perpetuation of what is traditionally correct', may perhaps be welcomed by those who earn a living in the traditional crafts. Outside this domain such stereotypes can become dangerous, for instance when the absence of individuality is used as an argument against democracy.⁷ This is certainly not what John Sanday meant. He relates how the traditional crafts were revived by the new restoration projects with the help of foreign money. Without this revival the projects would have been impossible, but without the foreign help the revival would not have been possible.⁸ The traditional crafts are, so to speak, re-invented by the foreign concern for the continuity of a much admired culture. From this point of view, it would be strange to call the newly revived crafts the expression of a living culture. The living culture is found outside the World Heritage Sites and also in the many recently painted temples with modern additions.

The gap between the living culture and the culture of scientific restorations is wide and this is reflected in the different ways the historical architecture is dealt with. The clever restorations of the international specialists are transformations from everyday life into a dream of the past as true as one can possibly make it. These restorations represent, so to speak, the consciousness of cultural heritage, the expression of an interest in history. As such, these constitute an importation of scientific research into an otherwise much threatened historical environment. Here history can be revived, but only with the help of artificialities, such as dollars, knowledge and imagination.

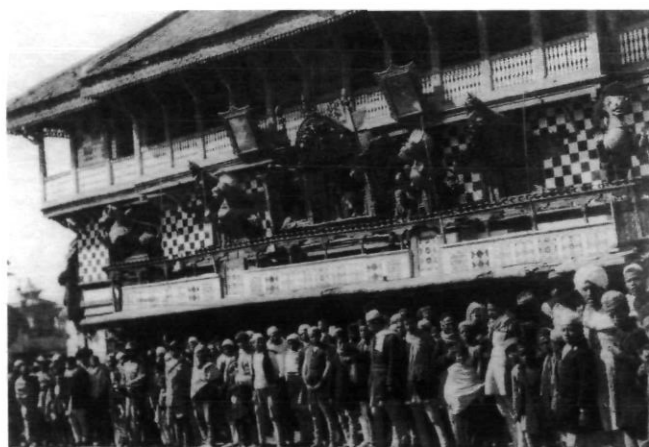
The restoration between 1990 and 1995 of the Buddhist monastery *I Baha Bahi* in Patan, a project of the Nippon Institute of Technology in Japan, is a splendid example of the scientific approach. The distance between this restored building and the living culture can be demonstrated by the fact that the modern stucco on the front has not been reconstructed, probably because not much of it was left and because of the fact that the stucco could not have been original. By leaving out the stucco, the Japanese have cut one of the threads by which the past was connected to the present. Inside the courtyard some sculptured wooden members had to be replaced, because they were lost. The new elements were left unadorned, for instance some members and some parts of the cornices of the balcony, as there was not enough evidence for a reliable reconstruction of the carvings.⁹

The crafts and historical values

Everybody will agree that this kind of restraint is laudable in the context of a historically correct restoration, but was it necessary? In the *I Baha Bahi* new carvings could after all have been added in such a way that the difference between old and new was recognizable, but not disturbing. This issue is much discussed in the Kathmandu Valley, where organizations from various countries introduce their respective opinions in their restoration projects. UNESCO is of course in favour of restraint, that means leaving some parts unadorned – blank – since a restoration, according the Charter of Venice ‘must stop at the point where conjecture begins’. Other organizations, like The Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust, are less convinced of the universal applicability of the charter. They point out that such restraint diminishes the visual unity and is often unsuitable, as it expresses



Afb. 6. The Akash Bhairava temple at Indra Chowk in Kathmandu in 1900.

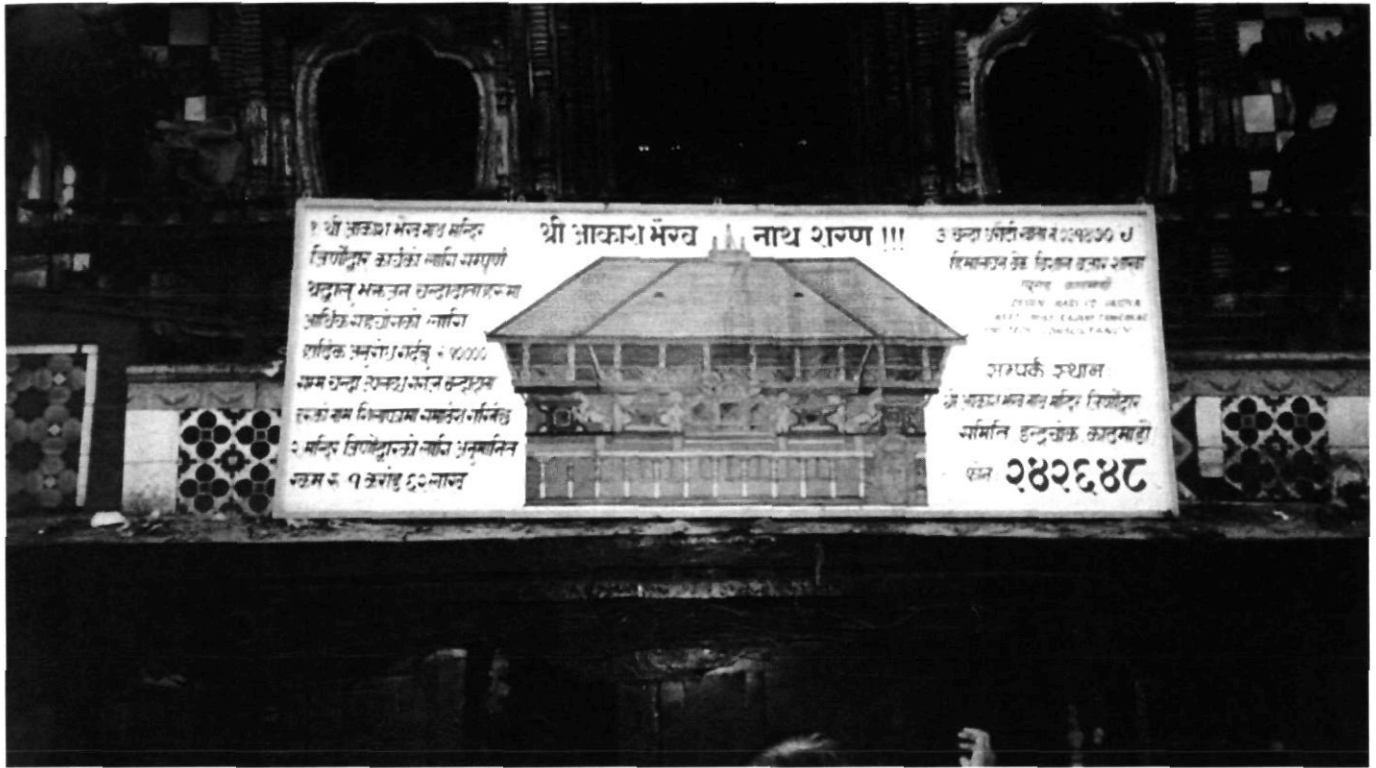


Afb. 7. The modernized Akash Bhairava temple in 1939.

considerations which may be too far removed from the impression the architecture is trying to make. Abstaining from the introduction of new carvings, which should – it is hardly necessary to add – always harmonize with the existing architectural environment, seems a crude and unpolite gesture, a forced course of action, an act of doctrinarian and patronizing legalists. Leaving out decorations in religious buildings in order to comply with international guidelines can only be understood by someone who shows more respect for historical correctness than for the temple as a gift to the gods. At this point it is necessary to remark that this kind of restraint is exceptional in Europe and it is therefore high time for UNESCO to exert the necessary pressure on national governments there in order to be consistent with their own guidelines. The discussion on this issue started in Europe, remained unresolved and was subsequently exported to the East, especially to the Kathmandu Valley.

The Charter of Venice was, I think, mainly directed against the European mania for reducing every monument to its original state and for wiping out the architectural contributions of the nineteenth century. And the prescription that ‘any extra work which is indispensable must be distinct from the architectural composition and must bear a contemporary stamp’ was a deplorable mistake of architects who still gave credence to the artistic principles of the Modern Movement. It is simply unpolite to damage a monument by introducing modern design. The experts in Venice overlooked the fact that there are also subtle ways to restore. It is enough to show in an unobtrusive way what has been added in order to recapture the beauty of a building. The deliberate display of zealous honesty by showing the scars history has inflicted on a building or by confronting the defenceless monument with provocative modern design, is a relatively new phenomenon in the world of conservation, probably developed in connection with the rise of modern art theories.

The discussion on this issue became relevant again on the occasion of the restoration of the Sulima Ratnesvara Temple in Patan.¹⁰ The restoration of this temple includes new timber roof struts with new carvings, which are reconstructions on the basis of old photographs, old fragments and examples from other, comparable temples. According to one viewpoint the new old carvings are nothing but fake, whereas the other viewpoint defends this approach by pointing out that plain struts represent a typically Western attitude, which is wholly alien to the local people. It seems that two different cultures collide in this respect, but perhaps the controversy only exists as long as one follows the rule of the ‘contemporary stamp’ of the Charter of Venice. The historical value of the monument is probably not diminished by reconstructions of lost fragments, as long as these can be distinguished from the original work and as long as the reconstructions are subservient to the existing architecture. The question of how to make such distinctions is a matter of taste. The less obvious the distinction the better, but some distinction would seem to be a gesture of respect towards the old work. While this approach deviates



Afb. 8. Project for the reconstruction of the Akash Bhairava (1999).

indeed from the Charter of Venice, it is nonetheless no crude violation of it either.

All professional considerations of this kind must be seen in their proper perspective, for when an earthquake has finished its terrible work, the world of preservation must respect the wish to rebuild the devastated architecture in order to recapture the lost habitat. A charter which forbids that is cruel.

There never was much opposition against the rebuilding between 1987 and 1990 of the seventeenth century pavilion (the Cyasilin Mandap) on the Darbar Square in Bhaktapur, which was devastated during the earthquake in 1934. As in the case of the Sulima Ratnesvara Temple, there has only been some discussion about the completion of carved decorations in the style of the old work. In both cases it was decided to conceal any distinction between old and new. The architects did not dissimulate the steel of the construction inside the Cyasilin Mandap, for they wished to express the modernity of the building. The steel stands for honesty and the carvings for the continuity of the living crafts. The steel represents the Western attitude, as it is in harmony with the 'contemporary stamp' of the Charter of Venice. The carvings represent the local traditions. These are a violation of the charter, because the distinction between old and new carvings has been dissimulated. Here *les extrêmes se touchent* and this paradox might disturb our tourist, who has of course no detailed knowledge of professional debates. Perhaps the paradox could have been avoided by concealing the steel and not

concealing the difference between old and new carvings. Concealing the steel might be dishonest in Western eyes, but it pays respect to the design of the monument. Showing some difference between old and new carvings (impossible to discern from some distance) might also be a form of paying respect. If the craftsmen do not want to change their art, as some say, if they want to continue their own culture, nobody is entitled to blame them, but paying respect towards the arts of their own past does not force them to blot out the distinction between their work and that of their ancestors. Is it necessary for the 'living crafts' to deny the difference between the past and the present?¹¹

Some people believe that there are fundamental differences between the West and the East on this point. In Eastern cultures, they say, the historical substance as such is of much less importance than the *genius loci*. Preservationists in the West are believed to be more concerned with the material aspect of the monuments than their colleagues in the East. This difference would be based on 'underlying philosophical approaches to the cosmology of the world', as Chen Wei and Andreas Aas wrote.¹²

Defining cultures and nations in such general terms may be an obstacle to a better understanding between different cultures, because such definitions are nearly always used to enshrine identities and are mostly based on myths. In these kinds of comparisons the East is always represented as the world of mystery and the West as the world of reason. Take

for instance what Sir Alfred Lyall once said to Lord Cromer: 'Accuracy is abhorrent to the Oriental mind' and Cromer added that the European 'is a natural logician', whereas the reasoning of the oriental is 'of the most slipshod description'. This was written in the beginning of the twentieth century and we now know that it reveals more about the state of mind of the European rulers than of those who were ruled by them.¹³ In the beginning of the nineteenth century the German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel prepared the way for these kinds of orientalist stereotypes by explaining that the Indian mind lacks a sense of history and objectivity: 'The Hindoo race', he wrote, 'has consequently proved itself unable to comprehend either persons or events as part of continuous history, because to any historical treatment a certain objectivity is essential ...'.¹⁴

Our tourist, who certainly did not expect to end up with this kind of pedantic judgements, begins to understand that people in the East sometimes define their own culture according to concepts which were developed in the West.¹⁵ The orientalist view on the East as a static and unchangeable culture, in which traditions remain always the same and are not subject to the influence of temporary circumstances, may have been a creation of the West, it can indeed also be found in the East. 'We Indians', the Indian psychotherapist Sudhir Kakar said, 'use the outside reality to preserve the continuity of the self amidst an ever-changing flux of outer events and things'.¹⁶ But who is entitled to speak for all the people in a culture?¹⁷

In 1999 the municipality of Kathmandu announced the reconstruction of the Akash Bhairava Temple at Indra Chowk. This temple was modernized in the first quarter of the twentieth century to include non-traditional elements. The project to remove these elements and to reconstruct the original appearance of the temple is probably based on concepts from the West. In this case the East seems to adapt a European tradition of reconstructing the original appearance of the monuments. This tradition goes back to nineteenth century architects like Eugène Viollet-le-Duc. But the irony here is that nowadays many experts from the West reject this tradition and try to prevent the removing of alterations which have been made more than a generation ago and which are for this reason valued as an integral part of the historical fabric. It seems that the municipality of Kathmandu is as old-fashioned as the minister of Culture of France, Jack Lang, who in 1990 gave permission to destroy the nineteenth century restoration of the Saint-Sernin in Toulouse. This romanesque church had been restored by Eugène Viollet-le-Duc in 1860 and has now been 'dérestauré' by his modern colleague Yves Boiret.¹⁸

Demolition and Decay, London, Macmillan, 1971 and *Paris Perdu. Quarante Ans de Bouleversements de la Ville*, Paris, Carr, 1991.

- 3 Rem Koolhaas, *Small, Medium, Large, Extra-Large*, Rotterdam, 010, 1995, p. 1248 and 1263.
- 4 John Sanday, *The Kathmandu Valley. Odyssey Illustrated Guide*. Hong Kong, The Guidebook Company, 1995, p. 59 and 69.
- 5 Wim Denslagen, *Architectural Restoration in Western Europe: controversy and continuity*, Amsterdam, Architectura & Natura, 1994.
- 6 David Watkin, *Morality and Architecture. The Development of a Theme in Architectural History and Theory from the Gothic Revival to the Modern Movement*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1977.
- 7 Ian Buruma, *The Missionary and the Libertine. Love and War in East and West*, London, Faber and Faber, 1996.
- 8 According to Niels Gutschow (during my visit to Nepal in November 1999).
- 9 Katsuhiko Watanabe, *The Buddhist Monasteries of Nepal. A Report on the I Baha Bahi Restoration Project*, Nippon Institute of Technology 1998.
- 10 Rohit Ranjitkar and Erich Theophile, *Sulima Ratnesvara Temple. Sulima, Patan*, Historic Structure Report of the Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust (1998).
- 11 Niels Gutschow und Götz Hagmüller, 'Die Rekonstruktion des achteckigen Pavillons (Cyasilin Mandap) auf dem Barbar Platz in Bhaktapur (1987-1990)', *Deutsche Kunst und Denkmalpflege* (1991), pp. 137-155, 150.
- 12 Chen Wei and Andreas Aass, 'Heritage Conservation: East and West', *Icosmos Information* 3 (1989), pp. 3-8.
- 13 Edward Said, *Orientalism*, Penguin Books 1991, 38 (first published in 1978).
- 14 Partha Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters. History of European Reactions to Indian Art*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1977, pp. 210.
- 15 Louis Dumont, *La Civilisation Indienne et Nous. Esquisse de sociologie comparée*, Paris, Armand Colin, 1964, pp. 34.
- 16 Quoted by V.S. Naipaul, *India, A Wounded Civilization*, Penguin Books 1977, pp. 103.
- 17 Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for 'Indian' Past?', *Representations* 37 (1992), pp. 1-26.
- 18 *Le Monde* (8 August 1990) and *Saint-Sernin de Toulouse. Trésors et Métamorphoses. Deux siècles de restaurations 1802-1989*. Catalogue of the exhibition at the Hôtel de Sully in Paris (1990).

Noten

- 1 Report of UNESCO on the Kathmandu Valley World Heritage Site (1998), p.46.
- 2 See for instance Hermione Hobhouse, *Lost London. A Century of*