VANITY FAIR

CULTURE CLASH

Bansagopal Temple, from the 17th century, in Kathmandu's Durbar Square. *Photographs by Robert Polidori.*

The Once and Future Kathmandu

After a glorious efflorescence as the link between Hindu India and Buddhist China, Nepal was isolated from the world until 1950. The result: Kathmandu Valley, where a medieval past is vibrantly present, architectural marvels are part of everyday life, and the sacred is pervasive. Amid thousands of temples, pagodas, monasteries, and other hallowed structures, the author salutes preservation efforts to bring Nepal's magic into a third millennium.

by LUCINDA LAMBTON WEB EXCLUSIVE August 12, 2008

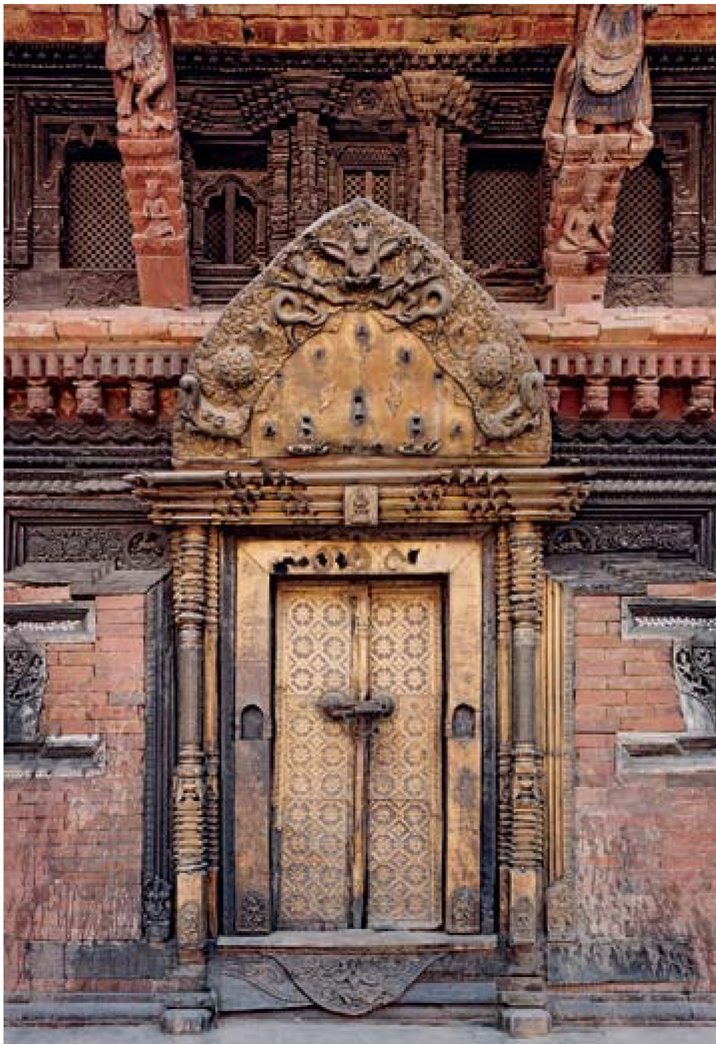
Where does the magic of the Kathmandu Valley come from? The answer, I think, is that there can be few other places in the world today that still march to the rhythm of medieval life; where literally thousands of sacred structures, including pagodas, temples, stupas, shrines, monasteries, votive pillars, fountains, and wells, as well as houses and palaces, all of them serving both God and man, are still vibrantly alive with their original cultural and spiritual significance.

Geography must take some of the credit. Nepal, lying between China and India—the "yam between two rocks," as it has been called—was for centuries an important trading route between the two countries. With snow blocking the mountain passes to the north (negotiable only in summer on swaying rope bridges that made one Tibetan lama "tremble more than quicksilver") and the threat of malaria in the jungles to the south in summer, all the traders, travelers, ambassadors, artisans, pilgrims, scholars, and students had to spend months in the three towns of the Kathmandu Valley—Kathmandu, Patan, and Bhaktapur—thereby creating the cauldron of culture, sophistication, and wealth which produced these architectural marvels.

Four ruling dynasties—the Licchavis, Mallas, Shahs, and Ranas—blazed the building trail from the fourth century onward, and today it is not uncommon to come upon a small Licchavi holy stone—a lingam dating from the 300s—covered with votive offerings and still playing a vital role in everyday life. There it is, deep in a rough hole in the road, showing how much the street level has risen since the fourth century.

Hinduism and Buddhism have coexisted here since earliest times in an atmosphere coursed through with a myriad of spirits, all subsumed into daily life. There is no division between the sacred and the profane; it is said that there are as many gods as there are people in the valley, and as many temples as there are dwellings; nearly every house has a shrine to the family god.

With a multitude of holy structures at every turn, amid a dense and ancient network of interlocking courtyards and narrow lanes filled with shops and workshops the size of broom cupboards, the sense of the medieval is palpable.



A detail of the Patan Royal Palace.

How could it be otherwise? It is an extraordinary story. Nepal was cut off from the rest of the world until 1950, when the first airplane arrived. With no influences from the outside world, the country's traditions had remained the same for hundreds of years, progressing with a continuum of culture and craftsmanship that flourishes to this day.

In the 1970s architects, academics, town planners, preservationists, anthropologists, and historians from all over

the world poured into this tiny valley. As their contemporaries worldwide banged the drum for soul-less modernism, Nepal represented a dream of safeguarding humanity from change. Earthquakes and neglect had taken their toll, but with craftsmen descended from generations of craftsmen before them, Nepalese restoration meant seamlessly perpetuating the traditional styles.

The movement to preserve the valley's architectural wonders has gathered momentum ever since. In an act of astonishing bravura, in 1969, to celebrate the wedding of King Birendra, the German government backed the restoration of the Pujari Math, a Hindu priest's house, and later undertook the restoration of more than 200 buildings in the town of Bhaktapur. In 1972, UNESCO began restoring the vast Hanuman Dhoka Royal Palace, in Kathmandu's Durbar Square. There have subsequently been heroes aplenty, but here I must reserve my plaudits for the Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust, founded in 1991 by Harvard professor emeritus of architecture Eduard Sekler and American architect Erich Theophile, on whose heads I place glistening laurels; for, to date, the trust has saved, or helped to save, some 50 buildings. The most prominent supporter of the cause is Prince Charles, who helped launch K.V.P.T.'s plans for Patan's Royal Palace complex by hosting a fund-raiser at Clarence House and making a donation from his personal trust. Restoration of the complex began in May of this year.

Krishna Mandir, a 17th-century temple in Patan's Durbar Square, is the most revered stone monument in Nepal.

The K.V.P.T. is now run from Patan by a team of Nepalese architects, engineers, and historians, advised and helped whenever necessary by a team of international historians, scholars, and conservators. It was Sekler, for

example, who persuaded the Andy Warhol Foundation to fund the restoration of an elaborately carved private rest house—*pati*—in Patan's Durbar Square. The team's latest triumph has been the conservation of the great 16th-century Jagannath Temple, in Kathmandu's Durbar Square, funded by a rare combination of Wall Street and Nepal's private sector through a Robert W. Wilson Challenge Grant and matching contributions from Nepal's first corporate campaign. This success attracted new donors such as the American Ambassador's Cultural Preservation Fund.

Conservation, however, is a constant challenge; with the modern world now marching in, concrete is crushing the continuum of the ages. The Nepalese have always preferred rebuilding to restoration; votive architecture favors rebuilding—the greater the gift, the greater your kudos.

Sundari Cok, a 17th-century courtyard of the Patan Royal Palace.

There are also the constant battles among the experts of Eastern versus Western restoration ideals. For example, some respected experts believe contemporary carving amounts to fakery, invoking false nostalgia. But all the scholarship in the world could not match the living heritage of people who know how to carve in this way—people, furthermore, who actually care which god goes where. "When six Newar guys sit round a table," says Theophile, "and fight about which instrument is carried by which god, that's preservation, that's living." These are families descended from the original families who donated the temples, as well as craftsmen descended from the original craftsmen who built the structures, and also priests who are descended from the original priests. Theophile is jubilant: "There is a spiritual authenticity here that has been going on for 2,000 years."

Artistic endeavor in the valley blossomed most brilliantly between the 1400s and the 1780s, specifically metalwork and woodwork of extraordinary delicacy and variation. In Newar carving, layer upon writhing layer of gods dance, godlets ride elephants, horses leap forth, birds perch, yaks' tails swish, snakes twist, swords are brandished, lions sit staring, tigers are hunted, and a great many strangely stylized crocodiles lurk. A thousand skulls are carved into the pillars framing one doorway; 10,000 leaves and flowers are carved into another, interspersed with monkeys, ducks, stars, eggs, frills, water vessels, and lotus leaves, as well as a myriad of abstract patterns. Nothing is ever repeated. Doorframes might whirl up into a tympanum of wood or gilt copper repoussé, richly carved with deities and creatures. Windows have carved, enlarged frames, shutters, latticework,

columns, long lintels, and sills. Standing in one of the private or public courtyards (the *chowk*s) or the Buddhist monastery courtyards (the viharas and *bahar*s), one feels embraced by the carvings' exuberant gaiety.

The Mahadev Temple, in Indra Cok, Kathmandu, rebuilt after the great earthquake of 1934.

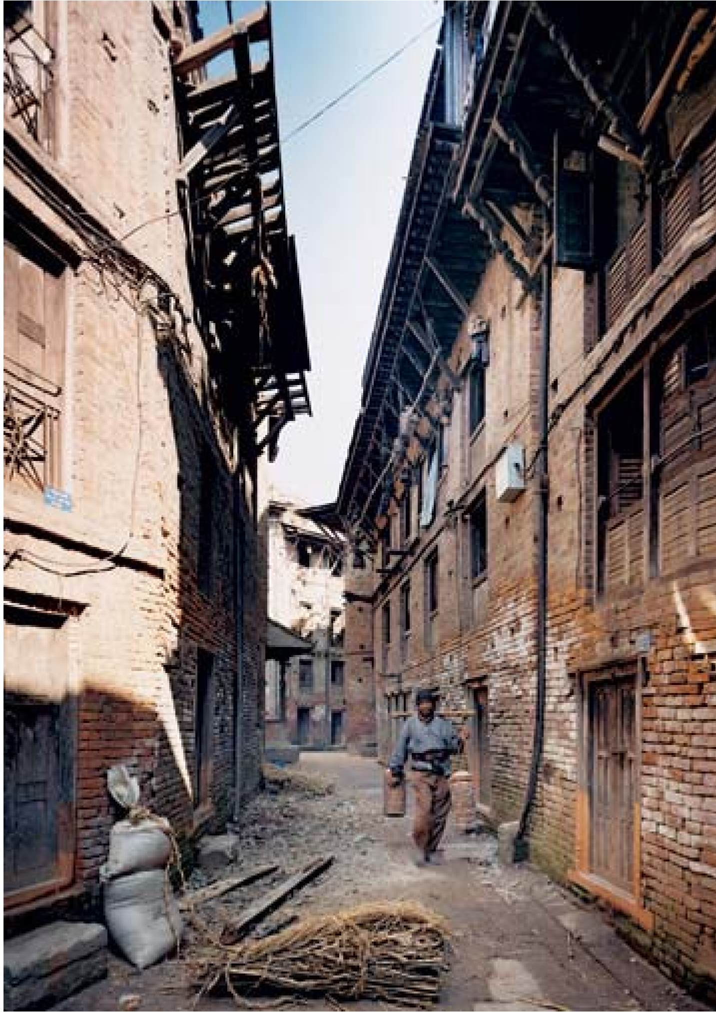
Kathmandu's Chhusya Bahal, the "monastery of sun-dried grain," built in the 18th century and recently restored with the help of the K.V.P.T., is one such vihara, with roof struts of deities carved with extraordinary delicacy. Each deity has four faces—the greater the number, the greater the deity's power—and eight arms flying forth, their hands holding such attributes as bows, arrows, swords, and banners. Rem Ratna Byracharya, the priest who comes here daily to worship, represents the 11th generation of the family to do so.

The Kumari Baha, also in Kathmandu, is another courtyard building with windows of startling intricacy: a peacock whose tail makes up the entire latticework, as well as waddling ducks and galloping horses, all surrounded by gods, some reigning supreme, others languishing and riding crocodiles. It is the home of Kumari Devi, the Living Goddess, worshipped by Hindus and Buddhists alike—a child who is chosen to live here when she is about four years old, never leaving (except to process in festivals) until she reaches puberty, bestowing her blessings on all who are lucky enough to see her. As I was gazing at the banquet of woodwork, suddenly she appeared at her window, a brightly robed little figure, swathed in jewels and elaborately made up, with, sadly, a look of world-weariness in her eyes.

Perhaps the two most enjoyable museums in the world—one of the old school, one of the new—are both to be found in the Kathmandu Valley. For idiosyncratic charm, there is Kathmandu's Hanuman Dhoka Palace, where, in the king's museum, set up in 1978, there exist thousands of such exhibits as "King Tribhuvan's Favourite Bicycle," monogrammed on the mudguard, as well as photographs of his favorite horse and dog, and, as he was "a lover of music, literature, and the arts," his radiogram is on display.

The Patan Museum, in what was the king's palace in Durbar Square, is a building that is a work of art in itself, filled with sublime works of art, set in a townscape that is the greatest work of art of all. As the architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable wrote, "When a museum and its contents come together as an integrated aesthetic, something special happens. The art is enlarged and exalted and the viewer's rewards and responses are

increased.... It is the secret of the great museum."


A back lane outside of the Patan Durbar Square World Heritage site, where urban farmers still live in dilapidated buildings.

Patan's Durbar Square is a place that is vibrantly alive with the spirit of the past. Time and time again I was silenced, shaking my head in disbelief at the sight of so many pagodas and palaces, temples and shrines, standing amid the maelstrom of medieval yet modern life: prayer bells are ringing, priests are blessing, people by the score are worshipping. Men run past with mattresses on their backs or with teetering towers of plastic chairs; sari-clad women sit hunched in the midst of mounds of nylon clothes for sale, with tracksuits, trainers, anoraks, and leather jackets; others pass by with baskets hanging from yokes on their shoulders. On the steps of the royal palace, glamour posters of Western women lie with posters of the gods. There are mounds of peanuts and sizzling dumplings. A wedding party hurries by with the bride carried on the shoulders of her father, who, like all the others, is weeping at her leaving home. Stray dogs are sadly slumped about, while handsome, lethargic youths lounge on the various temples' steps. Neat and tiny mounds of chilies are laid out with ginger and garlic, as well as bowls made from sal-tree leaves filled with spring onions and radishes. There are plastic tennis rackets and tin clockwork mice, patties, popcorn, and nylon bedcovers, all for sale. Old gentlemen sit in a long row beneath the fantastical windows of the Patan Museum. An elaborately carved rest house (restored by the Andy Warhol Foundation) is being used as originally intended, as is the sixth-century copper repoussé Mani Dhara, which spouts water from a fish within a fish within the mouth of a crocodile. Women and children sit around the Pilgrim's House (restored by the K.V.P.T.), where the god Ganesh is lit up in his shrine and stray dogs lie at the door. Women are washing saucepans; men are selling tangerines and oranges from baskets on bicycles. Bright watches and clocks are jostled with thousands of DVDs, as well as Buddhas and mobile

telephones. And what a noise; with prayer bells ringing, carpenters chiseling, metalworkers hammering, horns tooting, loudspeakers blaring, people shrieking and chattering, food sizzling. What other great historic urban space is there in the world that has flung itself so wholeheartedly into modern life while retaining its spiritual soul and stately beauty?

Lucinda Lambton is a writer, photographer, and broadcaster.