

# **Applied Conservation Practice withing a Living Cultural Heritage Site**

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## Introduction

The Darbar Square and Royal Palace in Patan, Nepal, are recognized as site of Outstanding Universal Value and Living Heritage. The site is not only defined by its tangible structures, comprising the palace buildings, temples, monuments and fountains, but also by the intangible values tied to traditions, rituals and religious practice. Both are deeply intertwined. The buildings and works of art reflect the knowledge and skills of local artisans in craftsmanship in timber, metal, pottery and stone. Tangible structures and artifacts are integral part to daily life; their continued use, function and significance is emphasised through ongoing community interaction which leaves visible traces of worship, wear and tear. However, present societal shifts and changing lifestyles in Patan have influenced intangible and living heritage. Heritage practitioners and artisans report a shortage of interest and young talents in traditional crafts and a declining quality in the same; further relocating communities, lack of interest among younger generations and tourism impact the continuation of traditions.

Conservation in Patan is a complex and evolving process. Since the late 20th century, Patan has served as a 'testing ground' for various conservation approaches. National and international actors and stakeholders have been involved and left traces. The collaboration between the Institute of Conservation, University of Applied Arts Vienna (IoC) and the Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust (KVPT) from 2010-2024 is subject of this study.

## Research questions

Following questions are examined in this dissertation:

How does the continuous use of objects/monuments at Patan Darbar Square influence their conservation, and how do conservation practices in turn impact the continued use?

To what extent do the materiality of the object / monument and its significance for the global / local community influence the conservation approach? When is the focus of conservation on material preservation and when on artisanal approaches to renewal or reproduction?

What approaches to the care, maintenance and conservation of cultural heritage are present in Patan that differ from our Western-based understanding? In what ways can local traditional conservation practices be integrated with or complemented by contemporary conservation methods?

## Methods

Within the theoretical frameworks of Critical Conservation Theory, Critical Heritage Studies and Living Heritage / People-centred Approaches to Conservation, a mixed-methods approach is used:

The study draws on empirical observations from a decade-long collaboration in conservation between the IoC and KVPT (2010-2024), examining case studies of stone and metal conservation projects in Patan. Comparative case studies (e.g., from Asia and Europe) aim to categorise and interpret the analysed examples from Patan.

The study also incorporates nine semi-structured interviews with heritage practitioners in Patan, analysed through grounded theory and thematic analyses.

During an on-site campaign in 2024, conserved monuments were surveyed and implemented measures evaluated. Results were discussed with heritage practitioners from Nepal in the framework of a symposium in December 2024 in Vienna, and insights gained were fed back into research.

### Preliminary results

The following conservation projects in Patan served as main case studies and were analysed in more detail with regard to the research questions: the Harishankara Idol, the Throne of the Patan Kings, the Ivory Window, the Golden Door.

Two case studies – the conservation of Harishankara Idol and King's Throne – revealed that ongoing use and liveliness of tangible objects are determining factors in the extent of conservation measures. More specifically, these may affect the extent of reinforcement and the choice of adhesives; materials were chosen that are more resistant to repeated handling and weathering, when objects are placed outside or are part of processions. Also, the scope and level of detail of fillings, indents, and retouching was adjusted; missing parts were closed and integrated in colour so that they were hardly identifiable. Conservators went further in their treatment than would have been necessary to merely secure substance and avoid further loss.

Idols are enlivened from a local perspective and this livingness is the very reason for the significance of the tangible manifestation. Damaged or broken idols cannot be worshipped why the objects become redundant and are replaced with new ones.

To respect and take into account the needs and wishes of both believers (replica of damaged idol) and scientists (preservation of historical idol) a consensus was developed in Patan: both the conserved original and a replica were placed side by side in the sanctum of the reconstructed Harishankara Temple.

Frequented/used monuments also call for more intrusive measures and more substantial interventions related to safety, security and accessibility. In this context also modern materials, like steel and cement, are rather accepted if they increase strength and resistance of a monument, but they should not be visible or alter the structure, why they are particularly used in foundations or within the roof structure. In general, traditional materials and methods are favoured; in some cases, lack of knowledge on what is "traditional" causes controversy.

It can be concluded that tangible and intangible go side by side in Patan. Intangible cultural heritage and living practices – often related to rituals, religious practices, worshipping and sacrifices – give an important layer of meaning and significance to the physical / material heritage.

Continued use favours long-term preservation of monuments and objects, but the use of enlivened objects in religious practice requires completeness and integrity. If objects don't fulfil these criteria, they easily become redundant.

Further, more substantial changes, repairs and replacements to increase the structural stability and safety of monuments for users are important; the preservation of substance is not always at the forefront here.

Another recurring topic in conservation projects in Patan is whether and to what extent material is preserved or building component and decorative elements are renewed or reproduced using artisanal approaches.

Arguments to preserve historical materials/components mentioned in the interviews and literature and provided by international conventions include i.e., authenticity, respect toward

originals and the information content (material evidence for age of an object, source to study iconography, inscriptions). In practice, also the high costs and the lack of qualified human resources (artisans) for renewal or reproduction of damaged components are crucial. This applies for example to construction and decorative parts made of stone and hardwoods. In the case of timber elements, weathered and decayed parts are replaced using artisanal approaches, following traditional local practice and because of the very vivid craftsmanship in woodcarving in the Kathmandu Valley; at the same time, it is aimed to make only partial replacements and preserve still intact substance.

Renewal or reproduction ("making new") is considered integral to local culture. Demolishing damaged structures and reconstructing them from the scratch are described as the widely accepted and favoured approach among the average local population, whereby private houses are more affected by destruction and rebuilding than protected public monuments and temples. Demolishment is also ideologically or politically motivated as well as fashion-driven. Among local heritage practitioners complete dismantling and rebuilding are seen as bad (conservation) practice; partial repair is favoured.

Regarding figures of deities, it is widely accepted that if they are eroded or heavily damaged / decayed, it is a living tradition to make a new one.

As both a World Heritage site, major tourist destination and living heritage hub with vivid craftsmanship tradition and a strong and powerful community, Patan requires a nuanced approach to conservation. It needs consensus/hybrids, balancing the diverse needs and voices within the core and wider community, actual conservation principles and locally evolved practices, and legal and safety requirements, rather than the imposition of certain established concepts and practices. The study highlights the potential for diversity, openness towards and blending of (conservation) cultures in preserving Patan's heritage and contributes to broader discussions on conservation strategies for living heritage sites globally.