Sustaining heritage in the face of disaster: 
the importance of the intangible, from Nepal to New Zealand and Australia

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Abstract

The impact of the 2015 earthquakes on the cultural heritage of Nepal has been substantial. Not only were the built heritage, artworks and collections affected, but also the intangible attributes associated with heritage places, the spiritual and social connections, festivals, stories and customary activities that form part of the daily life of the Nepali people.

Since the earthquakes many of these intangible attributes have been identified as key to a sustainable recovery. Seasonal festivals have continued as part of the healing process for the people. Traditional community based structures (guthi) are being revived to ensure that the people associated with particular sites are included in their recovery and ongoing care. The knowledge and skills of artisans are being recognized, not only for their capacity to accurately reconstruct the buildings, but also for their importance to ensuring that the stories and traditions associated with the sites continue to be passed on to future generations.

With reference to the World Heritage property of the Kathmandu Valley, this paper discusses the importance of intangible attributes to the recovery of Nepal’s cultural heritage. It then considers the lessons learnt for the conservation, recovery and sustainability of Australia and New Zealand’s heritage in times of disaster.

Introduction

The impact of the 2015 earthquakes on the cultural heritage of Nepal was substantial. But it was not only the tangible attributes of Nepal’s cultural heritage that were affected by the disaster (the significant monuments and sites, historic urban precincts, ancient settlements, temples, shrines, artworks and collections). The intangible attributes associated with these places were also impacted and the social and spiritual values expressed through the Nepali people’s beliefs, customary practices, rituals and festivals, legends and stories, were all severely disrupted. These intangible attributes connected the people to the places and to each other, contributing to their collective sense of identity. With particular reference to the World Heritage property of the Kathmandu Valley, this paper discusses the importance of the intangible aspects of Nepal’s cultural heritage to its recovery.

This paper also considers the role of intangible expressions of cultural heritage values in the Australian and New Zealand contexts, using examples from the Black Saturday Bushfires in Victoria (2009) and the Canterbury earthquakes in Christchurch (2010 and 2011). It explores the role of the intangible in reconnecting decimated communities, strengthening their sense of place and revitalising their sense of identity.
**World heritage property of the Kathmandu Valley**

The World Heritage property of the Kathmandu Valley comprises seven monument zones: the three Durbar Squares of the historic urban centres of Kathmandu (Hanuman Dhoka), Patan and Bhaktapur, each with their palaces, temples, public spaces and urban precincts; and the four religious ensembles of Swayambhu (the oldest Buddhist stupa in the Kathmandu Valley), Baudhanath (the largest stupa in Nepal), Pashupati (an extensive Hindu temple complex and forest precinct) and Changu Narayan (a traditional Newari settlement and Hindu temple complex dating from the fifth century AD). (WHC 2012, p.124).

The property is characterized by its unique tiered brick and timber temples, richly decorated with carvings and gilded brass ornamentation, and extremely large whitewashed hemispherical stupas, topped with gilded cubes featuring Buddha’s all seeing eyes and umbrella-like crowns. The architecture and ornamentation is emblematic of the fusion of the Buddhist, Hindu, Tantric and animist cultural traditions that have coexisted in the Kathmandu Valley since the fifth century. The sites and structures are also closely linked to local legends, rituals and festivals (Figures 1 and 2).

**Earthquake damage to the property**

The Gorkha earthquake of 25 April 2015 and its subsequent aftershocks had a dramatic impact on the built heritage of Nepal. Approximately 750 heritage sites were affected across the country, including severe damage to 199 monuments within the Kathmandu Valley World Heritage property (37 totally collapsed and 162 partially collapsed) (Shrestha 2016). All seven World Heritage monument zones were affected, with much of the destruction recorded through social media, photographs and video, including drone footage taken over several of Kathmandu’s most iconic heritage sites: Hanuman Dhoka, Baudhanath and Swayambhu (Rana 2015). Palaces with their precious collections, temples and shrines with their sacred objects and carvings, ashrams, sattals (monks’ accommodation), pilgrim rest houses (used by communities during festivals), public squares and traditional houses were all severely impacted (Figures 3 and 4).
Hanuman Dhoka Durbar Square, located at the centre of Kathmandu, was one of the most affected sites, with several of the large temples in the main square collapsing and the palace, which housed the Royal collection, suffering extensive damage. Kasthamandap, one of the city’s oldest buildings and considered to be the place after which the city was named, was initially reported to have killed more than 70 people when it fell. The Red Cross was collecting community blood donations inside the building at the time (Weise 2015b). The building was reputed to have been built almost 800 years ago, with its four main pillars cut from a single tree. Many people made daily offerings at its shrines.

In another part of the city, the nineteenth century Dharahara Tower, not part of the World Heritage property, but a place of national significance and a popular tourist site for both local and international visitors, also collapsed killing more than 150 people. Since the earthquake, the Nepali people have adopted the tower as the symbol of Kathmandu’s resilience and its determination to rebuild and rise above the disaster (Weise 2015b).

Figure 3: Earthquake damage to Hanuman Dhoka Palace and Aagan Temple (C. Forbes, October 2015)

Figure 4: Earthquake damage to Hanuman Dhoka Palace Durbar Museum, showing collapse of the Basantapur Bhawan (Nine Storey Palace) (C. Forbes, October 2015)
Immediate impact on intangible attributes

Cultural identity

Nepal’s cultural heritage is very much a living heritage with many of the sites and monuments in daily use by the people (Silva 2013; Weise 2015a; Denslagen 2013). The buildings and public spaces contributed to the distinctive character of Nepal’s historic urban areas and cultural landscapes and formed the physical context in which the people lived out their daily lives. These places represented the peoples’ inheritance, informing them of who they are and where they had come from (The *Australia ICOMOS Burra Charter* 2013), and should have been able to be passed on to future generations. The destruction of these valued places has had an immense impact on the people’s sense of identity as reflected in the messages sent out by survivors: ‘We are safe, but we have lost our heritage’ (Bishwokarma and Pradhananga 2015).

Spiritual offerings

Many of the affected places are important religious sites, where people undertake daily rituals, making offerings to the gods and consulting with priests regarding important decisions in their lives (Weise 2015a). The destruction of temples and shrines severely impacted people’s ability to continue these customary practices (Jing et al 2016; Sharma 2003). It is recognised that, in a time of crisis, these activities can be even more important as they provide reassurance and sustain people’s emotional and psychological wellbeing. Despite the destruction, offerings continued to be made to the surviving linga and other sacred objects and places located within the ruins (Jing et al 2016). The salvage of these precious objects by monks, priests and community members was a high priority in the immediate wake of the earthquake (Barry and Najar 2015).

At Swayambhunath, despite the loss of their own sattals (accommodation buildings), the monks focused on salvaging the important relics from the debris. The extent of debris and the precarious state of some of the monuments surrounding the main stupa made this important site extremely dangerous and inaccessible for prayers and meditation, affecting the daily rituals of both the monks and the local people (Jing et al 2016; ICCROM 2015; Eaton 2015). At Baudhanath, the collapse of the top of the giant stupa, including its yasti (central pole representing the axis mundi between heaven and earth), also compromised the ritual circumambulation of the stupa undertaken by many in their daily prayers and meditations (Jing et al 2016).

![Funerals taking place at Pashupati](C. Forbes, February 2014)
Funerary rites

Pashupati, with its golden temple, is an important pilgrimage site for Hindus from all over the world and one of the most important funerary sites in Nepal. Due to the high death toll (almost 9,000 people died in Nepal as a result of the earthquakes) and despite the damage to various monuments within the heritage precinct, the site remained open as it was essential that the people’s spiritual needs continued to be met. This included consulting priests, making offerings for the dead, carrying out spiritual cleansing of the bodies in the Bagmati River and then cremation on the ghats (Figure 5). The funerary fires continued to burn for many days and nights following the earthquakes (Cockroft 2015).

Stories, legends and festivals

Most of the temple sites are associated with significant stories and legends of the gods and goddesses to which they are dedicated (Gutschow 2003). These are told through the carvings on the temple struts and walls, many of which were damaged in the earthquake. Seasonal festivals are linked to these legends and often involve journeys between significant sites (Sharma 2003). The destruction of important sites along festival routes and the resulting debris created substantial impediments to the celebration of these festivals.

Recovery

Reopening of sites

Despite the damage, the reopening of sites to allow people to recommence their customary activities was considered to be a high priority by both local authorities and religious organisations. The debris was carefully cleared as quickly as possible, with the precious objects securely inventoried and stored and the salvaged materials stacked neatly for reuse. Those structures assessed as safe were reopened to the public, whilst others were stabilised and roped off for future damage assessment and repair (Figure 6) (Jing et al 2016; Parashar 2015).

Festivals

The roads and public squares were also carefully cleared to enable the seasonal festivals to go ahead, including the Rato Machhendranath festival, which involves pulling a towering cart
through the streets of Kathmandu and Hanuman Dhoka Durbar Square (Weise 2015a; Jing et al 2016). The festivals were seen as an important way of reuniting the community and promoting healing as the people came together to celebrate their survival and resilience.

**Votive offerings**

Most of Nepal’s temples have been built through votive offerings, initially through the gift of the temple itself and the land to provide the income to support its ongoing activities and maintenance (Weise 2015a), but later through gifts of sacred objects, materials and labour, and through food offerings to support the priests. The gifts are seen as an important means of earning spiritual merit (Gutschow 2003; Theophile and Ranjitkar 2003). The reconstruction of the temples will rely heavily on these offerings, which, despite people’s personal losses, commenced almost immediately following the earthquake.

At Baudhnanath, a new timber yasti was donated and its sacred carving facilitated by one wealthy devotee. Small golden images and other offerings were donated by various community members and after twenty days of meditation and prayers, were installed in reliquaries in the top of the stupa around the new yasti, which was re-erected to re-establish the axis mundi at the centre of the monument (Jing et al 2016). The reconstruction of the square top of the stupa, with its eyes and golden parasol, has followed (Jing et al 2017).

**Guthis**

Community based organisations, known as Guthis, are the traditional custodians of religious, cultural and social establishments in Nepal (Guthi Sanshan 2016; Weise 2015a). First established during the time of King Mandev I, they provide a cooperative management system to support the maintenance and preservation of monuments, public parks, pilgrims’ rest houses, travellers’ guesthouses, hospitals, schools and other religious and social institutions. They also maintain the important records of the sites and the customary practices, rituals and festivals. Revenue for these activities is raised through cultivation or rental of guthi property (Weise 2015a; Tiwari 2013).

Pashupati, Swayambhu and Baudhhanath all have active well-resourced guthis (or their modern equivalents) that oversee the day-to-day management and care of the sites and are now contributing substantially to their recovery. For other monument zones, where the guthis are not as well resourced or are no longer active, assistance is provided by the nationally based Guthi Sanshan, local government authorities, the Department of Archaeology and internationally supported heritage trusts. Non-religious sites are more likely to rely on this external assistance. Since the earthquake, revitalization of the guthi system has been promoted in many areas to enable local communities to become more active stakeholders in the recovery of the sites and to provide for their ongoing care and maintenance (Jing et al 2016; Weise 2015a).

**Traditional knowledge and craftsmanship**

The accurate repair and reconstruction of the temples will rely heavily on the knowledge of the local priests and craftsmen. In order that the stories and legends continue to be told through the carvings on the temples, it is important that the gods and goddesses are correctly depicted and arranged in accordance with the tantric formulas (Sharma 2015). Whilst the priests provide the religious knowledge and understanding required (Theophile and Ranjitkar 2015), the craftsmen provide the skills to repair or reproduce the carvings. This involves ensuring that figures are portrayed in their correct poses and with their correct attributes (Theophile and Ranjitkar 2015). Although salvaged elements have been carefully recorded, the accurate replication of lost elements is important to ensuring cultural continuity through skills and knowledge transfer (Jing et al 2017).

In the recent earthquakes it was found that many traditional structures that were in reasonable condition survived and that many of the buildings that had been repaired using modern interventions, particularly cement and concrete, did not survive. Traditional artisan skills and knowledge of anti-seismic construction will be essential to ensuring that the structures are
rebuilt to reasonably withstand future earthquakes (Weise 2015a; Menon 2013). However, in Nepal now, the number of traditionally skilled artisans is very small (Weise 2015a; Menon 2013; Denslagen 2013). Due to modernization in the construction industry over the last forty to fifty years, traditional artisan skills have not been valued and as a result the intergenerational transfer of these skills has been lacking. Thus one of the key programs developed by the Department of Archaeology for the recovery of the World Heritage property has involved identification of skilled craftsmen to run training programs to build capacity in this area (Jing et al 2016).

**The Australian and New Zealand context**

Whilst intangible attributes of cultural heritage significance (especially spiritual values) are relatively easy to recognise in a place like Nepal where they are embedded in everyday life and custom, it is not so easy to recognise them in secular societies such as those of Australia and New Zealand. So what do these attributes look like in our modern western context and how important are they to sustaining heritage in the face of disaster?

**Attachment to place**

The Maori refer to ‘turangawaewae’: ‘a place to stand’. It is their place in the world; the place where they feel empowered and connected. Aboriginal peoples in Australia talk about ‘being in country’ or ‘returning to country’; the country to which they belong. But this sense of attachment to place is not just an attachment experienced by indigenous societies. Most people have a place to which they feel strongly connected, a place they call home, a place where they feel they belong and which represents their cultural heritage.

In Australia, the strong spiritual connection between people and places is generally not well recognised or expressed. We tend to focus on the tangible rather than the intangible, and as a result, in a disaster situation, we focus on physical losses and needs to a much greater extent than psychological and emotional losses and needs. Although we talk about saving our family photographs, heirlooms and other memorabilia, we give little attention to saving our communal heritage, that which contributes to our cultural identity. We are expected to remain stoic, bear the loss and move on (Dalziel 2016a; Dalziel 2016b). Yet, when culturally significant places are destroyed, there is an enormous outpouring of grief within the community. Dr Sarb Johal (2016), clinical psychologist and associate professor in Disaster Mental Health, Massey University, New Zealand, has commented that the loss of cultural heritage through disaster is the equivalent of losing an arm or a leg. The person grieves for the loss and then learns to live and adapt, but they never recover the limb. In the same way, cultural heritage, once destroyed, is rarely recovered. Its loss is deeply mourned and the grief can leave communities broken.

At the same time, however, it is people’s spiritual and social attachment to a place and/or a community that can provide the strength and determination to rebuild. Moreton (2016), in her recent research into Australian communities severely affected by natural disaster, found that those with a strong sense of community identity and history, and a strong connection to place and the natural environment, are much more successful in adapting and rebuilding than those that do not have this connection. She also found that, despite years of absence, in times of disaster, people will return to the places and communities that matter to them, to help them salvage what remains of their heritage and rebuild. Thus, the importance of cultural heritage to recovery of devastated communities must be further explored in the Australian and New Zealand context.

**Community involvement in recovery**

At present, there is very little consideration given to cultural heritage in disaster risk management planning, emergency response procedures or post disaster recovery and reconstruction planning in Australia or New Zealand. The focus of our emergency responders, state authorities, damage assessors, insurance companies and recovery planners is firstly on safety and the humanitarian response, and then on rebuilding primary infrastructure and the economy. Little thought is given to cultural heritage and its value to the community’s wellbeing. Thus it rarely receives the same attention as it did in Nepal.
The decision to clean up and move on quickly immediately following a disaster is often made by those from outside the community (mostly at state or national level) and with no particular attachment to the place. This push to move forward and not look back is rarely promoted by those for whom the place is important. There seems to be a political imperative on the part of Government to demonstrate to the broader community that it is in control, visibly supporting the local community’s immediate physical needs and acting decisively to minimise risk, facilitate rebuilding and prevent future loss. The speed of the response, together with the focus on safety, often fails to recognise the cultural, spiritual and social needs of local communities and it usually ignores the need for local communities to have the time or opportunity to assess, salvage, stabilise and rehabilitate the places and items that are of value to them.

Almost thirty years after the event, members of Newcastle’s RSL club still grieve the loss of their archives and memorabilia to the 1989 Newcastle earthquake. Many of the items, including personal donations from ‘diggers’, were irreplaceable, and only a handful of relics, including a Boer War bugle, a First World War monument and a cross from an unknown soldier’s grave, were able to be salvaged from the local tip where the rubble of the club’s building had been taken following its demolition (Thomas 2017).

Communities are generally the custodians of their heritage, responsible for its ongoing use, management and care. In times of crisis, communities must continue to be involved in the decision-making processes relating to the future of their heritage, whether this involves salvage and rehabilitation, or demolition and replacement. Open discussion of the values of places to people, particularly the intangible attributes of those values (social and spiritual, but also symbolic and commemorative), as well as the risks associated with retention of heritage places, is particularly important to maintaining community identity and cohesion, and for promoting healing and recovery.

**Post earthquake Christchurch, New Zealand**

The government authorised mass demolition of the historic centre of Christchurch following the 2010 and 2011 earthquakes has had a huge impact on the people of Christchurch. The disaster and its aftermath destroyed the city centre, its cultural icons, place markers, streetscapes and public squares, all of which contributed to the city’s character, sense of place and identity. Thus, in the knowledge that they must now accept a new future for their city, the people of Christchurch have fought to hold on to the last vestiges of their heritage (NZonscreen 2011; Gates 2014; Kerrigan 2016). The ongoing efforts to save the Anglican Christ Church Cathedral, the Catholic Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament and other significant buildings are a reflection of the importance of these places to the city and its people, and exemplify the need for the community to maintain continuity between its past, present and future, despite the financial costs. Gap fillers and interpretive artworks, created by the community and supported by the Christchurch City Council, have been erected in the spaces left by the devastation to memorialise the impact of the earthquakes, tell the stories of the places and people lost, and express what they represented to the community. They have also been used in an endeavour to rebuild the devastated community by providing meeting places and spaces for sharing experiences.

**Adopting the Burra Charter approach**

In Australia, it is not common practice to replicate that, which has been destroyed, unless there is sufficient detailed evidence to support reconstruction. Although salvage and repair are options, the focus of recovery of places of cultural significance is generally on maintaining integrity and authenticity of the fabric (*Burra Charter* 2013). Thus, in the case of total destruction, it is more likely that a new structure of contemporary design will be erected to accommodate the significant functions, whilst connectivity with the past, the stories associated with a place and its other intangible attributes will be provided through interpretation.

**Narbethong Community Hall, Victoria, Australia**

In the Black Saturday Bushfires of 7 February 2009, the small community of Narbethong, located in the Upper Yarra Valley, northeast of Melbourne, lost its local community hall. The small timber hall had been built more than fifty years earlier (BVN 2012a; BVN 2012b) in
memory of community members who had died fighting a war on foreign shores, never to return home. It was, therefore, part of the community’s collective memory. But more than this, it had been the community’s meeting place, the place where the community came together to discuss important issues that affected the community as a whole, and the place where they had celebrated special events together (dances, christenings, weddings, birthdays and wakes). Therefore, although it was a simple fibro-lined building of no particular aesthetic value, the hall had immense social value to the people of Narbethong (Figures 7 and 8).

After the bushfires, one of the highest priorities for the small community was replacement of its hall. In the wake of the fires, the community found that they had nowhere to meet. Yet, it was in this time of crisis, that the community most needed a place to come together, share their sufferings, support each other and make decisions about their future. The loss of the hall was greatly felt and it was decided that if the community was to rebuild itself, it must rebuild its hall (BVN 2012a).

In close consultation with the local community, pro bono architects, BVN Architecture (in partnership with Emergency Architects Australia), not only designed the new hall to enable the community to reconnect with each other and rebuild, but also to reconnect the community with their natural and cultural heritage (BVN 2012a). Narbethong was founded as a ‘timber town’. Thus local timber was selected as the primary material for the interior of the building. The transparent external walls of the simple box-like structure allow the occupants to maintain a close visual connection with the surrounding landscape, and the tall timber mullions that enclose the central meeting space are reminiscent of the trees in the surrounding Black Spur Forest. Bronze fire resistant mesh is wrapped around the building to provide security and protection from future bushfires (BVN 2012b).

In 2012, the Narbethong Community Hall won both the state and national Royal Australian Institute of Architects awards for public architecture (Architecture & Design 2013), but more importantly, it won the hearts of the people in Narbethong.

Discussion and conclusion

It is relatively easy to recognise the social and spiritual values associated with the religious sites of Nepal. However, in the secular societies of Australia and New Zealand, these values can be far more difficult to recognise or comprehend. Yet these values are often the ones that attach people to places and contribute to community identity.
Following the 2015 earthquakes in Nepal, recognition of the importance of the spiritual and social values associated with the significant disaster affected places lead to a response that enabled customary practices to continue and ensured that remediation of the sites included local community stakeholders. In the Australian and New Zealand contexts, the urge to clean up quickly and efficiently, with decisions often being made by those who have no particular connection to the affected place, can have strong detrimental impacts on post disaster recovery of heritage places and the communities associated with them.

It must be recognised that, although communities may not have legal property rights over the places that matter to them, such as in the case of Christ Church Cathedral, they are stakeholders in the shared heritage to which these places are important contributors. The sudden loss of culturally significant places can bring immense pain to communities. Thus, it is important that, following disaster, local communities are consulted regarding proposed changes to their environment. For the successful recovery of culturally significant places, it is important that there is a shared understanding of the collective values that are attributed to these places by the various stakeholders for whom they are important. An open dialogue is required between government, property owners, community stakeholders and heritage practitioners and a participatory approach to decision making employed, one that recognises and seeks to reach an agreed resolution to potentially conflicting values and priorities that is acceptable to all relevant parties (The Getty Conservation Institute 2010).

The active involvement of local communities as custodians of their heritage is extremely important. Their role in protecting and sustaining significant places includes, not only maintaining their fabric, setting, collections and use, but also their associated meanings, activities and stories. When considering potential disaster scenarios, custodianship should also include preparing for and managing risks to places of cultural heritage significance, and then, in the wake of disaster, being involved in their salvage, rehabilitation and revitalization.

Where significant places are destroyed, such as in the case of Narbethong Community Hall, it is important that the design of any new facility recognizes and responds to the community’s social and spiritual needs, as well as their physical and practical needs. These values play an important role in reconnecting decimated communities, strengthening their sense of place and revitalising their collective sense of identity.

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