Over recent decades a more holistic view of cultural heritage has emerged, beyond simplistic tangible versus intangible dichotomies. Similarly, conservation has evolved from being material- to value-based, developing living heritage, people-centred and people-culture-nature approaches. As conservation interventions on objects, monuments and sites can affect an associated living culture and vice versa, conservators have a responsibility not only to understand tangible and intangible values, but also the local community and practitioners and bearers of tradition, by considering forms of ‘usage’ and ‘interaction’ with objects/monuments, identifying them before practical conservation starts. Whilst often constraining practice, living heritage can enrich professional work by encouraging participation and creativity through generating new, and adapting existing, approaches. This paper examines some (practical) implications of living heritage for conservation practice, by considering the Patan Durbar Square in Nepal, and the emphasis placed on continued use and community connection, to help conservators assume their social responsibilities and increase awareness of this issue.

Introduction

The way conservators think about heritage has expanded in recent decades, widening practice to take a more holistic approach that is concerned not only with tangible collections and monuments, but giving equal consideration to landscape setting, community, diversity and other intangible values. Emphasising the living dimension of heritage sites has promoted the revision of concepts and approaches within the domain of conservation, leading to people-centred, living-heritage and people-culture-nature approaches. This new thinking is reflected in texts such as the Burra Charter from 1979 and its updates (ICOMOS 2013), the Charter for the Preservation of Quebec’s Heritage 1982 (ICOMOS 1982) and the First Brazilian Seminar about the Preservation and Revitalization of Historic Centers 1987 (ICOMOS 1987). In the twenty-first century this development has been further sustained through various initiatives, such as the launch of the 2003 Living Heritage Sites programme by ICCROM, and the 2003 Convention adopted by UNESCO (UNESCO 2003).

The concept of living heritage is characterised by, and linked to, the concept of continuity. Wijesuriya (2018, 43), Poulios (2014) and others define this as: firstly, the continuity of a heritage site’s original function, meaning the purpose for which it was originally created or intended; secondly, the continuity of the community’s connection with heritage, emphasising the so-called ‘core community’ as an inseparable part of the heritage that communities create, utilise, maintain and adapt as living heritage; thirdly, the continuity of the care of heritage (traditional knowledge and management systems); and fourthly, the continuous evolution of expressions of tangible and intangible heritage in response to changing circumstances.

Recent studies acknowledge that ‘... there are greater implications for the conservation and management of heritage where the continuity of the original function is evident’ (Wijesuriya 2018, 7), following recognition by scholars at the beginning of the twentieth century that living cultural sites and monuments pose challenges to conservation requiring different approaches. Sir Charles Reed Peers, the first Chief Inspector of Ancient Monuments in England, stated in 1913 that (Forsyth 1914, 135):

... when a building is a ruin, you must do your best to preserve all that is left of it by every means in your power. When you come to a building which is being used as a dwelling house or a church [...] You have to perpetuate it as a living building, one adapted to the use of the present generation, but which has a history to be preserved.

In his 1923 conservation manual, Marshall argued (1923, 10) that ‘in the case of living monuments it is
The Patan Durbar Square: a living cultural site

Located in the foothills of the Himalaya in the Kathmandu Valley in Nepal, the Patan Durbar Square is the urban and cultural centre, as well as the functioning core, of Patan/Lalitpur, one of three former royal cities in the Kathmandu Valley, and is ranked among the ‘best existing historic urban spaces in the world’ (Sekler 1980, 4).

Clustered within an area of approximately 160 × 70 metres are more than 30 individually built structures of great beauty as well as artistic and historic significance (Figure 1). The architectural ensemble comprises the residence of the former Malla kings, the palace complex containing multiple courtyards, together with a large grouping of multi-tiered and shikhara-style temples, shrines, pillars and other monuments, dating from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries CE. Primarily built in brick and timber or stone, they reflect Nepali architectural history, characterised by exquisite craftsmanship and artistry associated with the local ethnic group of Newars. The tangible features, namely the buildings and monuments, are acknowledged to be key elements of Patan’s cultural heritage and were specified in the site’s listing as part of the Kathmandu Valley World Heritage Property in 1979 (criterion iv).³

Most historic environments, including Patan Durbar Square, are produced by the interrelations between tangible and intangible values through their formation and transformation processes’ (Karakul 2011, 107). The association between the architectural ensemble and intangible attributes is listed as part of the site’s outstanding universal value (criterion vi). Social, religious and urban daily life unfold in open spaces and courtyards, around and within the monuments. Throughout the year, people still hold rituals, worship, and stage important multi-day events and processions, just as in the past. Cultural activities, practices, cultural expressions and presentations are often closely linked to the site’s tangible features.

Many buildings continue to be used for their original function including the temples, which still provide the gods with shelter, and the patis, which are used as meeting and recreational areas. However, the palace has been converted into exhibition spaces and storage for the museum.

Such continued use results in wear and tear that requires repair, while changes in use and function or contemporary needs require adaptation. In Patan both activities have been underpinned by the continuity and living nature of highly developed craftsmanship, which forms another important aspect of living heritage in Patan (Haselberger, Ranjitkar, and Krist 2021).

Consideration of use

The Patan Durbar Square has been the subject of research since the nineteenth century. Monuments, daily life and cultural expression were documented in (photo)graphic and written descriptions by travellers, scholars and colonial officers,⁴ capturing not only the beauty and significance of the built structures, but also the intensive use of urban public space for everyday activities and the richness of cultural expressions.
Systematic recording of Nepalese cultural heritage started in the second half of the twentieth century. The first complete Kathmandu Valley Protective Inventory was compiled by Pruscha in 1975 (and revised in 2015, as Pruscha (2015)) to support the application for listing and protection of the valley through UNESCO’s World Heritage programme. Records include maps of urban monument zones (previously completely lacking) and basic surveys of 888 individual monuments across the whole valley, of which 136 bahals and 55 major multi-tiered temples are in Patan. Pruscha recognised that the square ‘still forms the background for the performance of religious festivals and ceremonies’ (Pruscha 2015, 1: 230). Pruscha mentioned linked festivals or performances for some monuments, but did not discuss the relationship between tangible assets and intangible values. Pruscha’s inventory is still valid today. Sekler (1980) proposed a next step a more comprehensive inventory based on analysis of literature, historic illustrations and old views, as well as the building themselves (i.e. an object-oriented approach), which has not yet been implemented.

Alongside the inventory, the first and only Master Plan for the Conservation of Cultural Heritage in the Kathmandu Valley was drafted by Sekler (1977). He referred to and incorporated definitions of ‘cultural heritage’ and ‘cultural property’ contained in pertinent UNESCO conventions such as the World Heritage Convention 1972. In addition, Sekler (1977, 9) argued that natural heritage and landscapes endowed with meaning (such as sacred mountains, forests, rivers) or shaped by people, movable artefacts, and folk arts of poetry, music and dance, also fall under the plan’s definition of cultural heritage. Through ‘being concerned not only with the material culture but also with the underlying non-material structure of culture’ (Sekler 1977, 9), he proposed a broader scope for his master plan. This position in the heritage discourse was quite progressive, connecting current and time-honoured tangible and intangible values, which conservation should treat equally (Sekler 1977, 22).

Furthermore, Sekler was the first to map the square’s use in the 1980s, since he recognised that an urban space’s many functions – serving cultural, social and economic life – are vital for its conservation, which should not interfere with their continued discharge. The resulting map shows how ground floors along the streets were then used: the use of temples was predominantly religious; the palace building was mainly used by the government; and intermediate areas and open space were used by shops and street traders (Sekler 1980). Further studies by Sekler and others mainly explored the ownership, purpose and use of space, urban development (Sekler 1979; Sanday et al. 1997; PAHAR Nepal 2004) and social activities (Shrestha and Chitrakar 2020), but rarely linked specific monuments with particular cultural activities. The Digital Archive of Nepalese Arts and Monuments (DANAM) database may explore this relationship further.

**Continued use and conservation practice**

Use has long been recognised as adding value to an object or monument, from Alois Riegl’s ‘use-value’
(Riegl 1903), to UNESCO recommending in 2005 that ‘the active use of an old building with sensitive alterations is more desirable than having a perfectly intact building that is not used’ (Vines 2005, 12). The 1933 Athens Charter (Doctrine I) and 1964 Venice Charter (Article 5) also recognised that conservation is facilitated by use.

Case studies from the Institute of Conservation in Patan illustrate how use and purpose influence conservation.

The central decorative element of the façade of Sundari Chowk, Royal Palace is an ivory window ensemble that is an artistic masterpiece, comprising three wooden frames embellished with carved ivory and fire-gilded repoussé work. Conservation required to stabilise the decayed and fragile original materials, especially the ivory, used minimally invasive measures (Krist et al. 2014), moving the two original ivory windows inside the museum to stop exposure to outdoor weathering and slow down deterioration, and replacing them with replicas using epoxy resin casts to imitate the ivory (Figure 2).

The window’s significance arises from its unique character and artistic value. Although performing a structural as well as a decorative role in the palace’s façade, the window is not used in the sense of being part of cultural activities and expressions. The focus of conservation was on preserving its historic and original materials, values that removal into the museum rate more highly than its continued use.

The Golden Door of Keshav Narayan Chowk is used as the entrance to the Royal Palace and the Patan Museum. In addition to being an important eighteenth-century artwork, the door is also associated with the local community’s regular visits to, and veneration of, a water vessel containing a Buddha figure, which is set up annually in front of the door during the festival of Gunla (Figure 3). Conservation and restoration of the door’s carved wood with gilded repoussé metalwork, involving careful cleaning and replacement of missing and stolen elements by craftsmen, was influenced by the need to sustain access to the water vessel in the planning of conservation, the erection of scaffolding and when carrying out of the work.

The Throne of the Patan Kings is not only one of the Patan Museum collection’s masterpieces, but also an integral part of the religious ceremony Jyeshtha Purnima. Once a year, the object is removed from the ‘protected’ museum environment and displayed in front of Krishna Temple. To facilitate its use, its treatment went beyond what would be required for the conservation of an object used solely as a museum exhibit, determining the extent of reinforcement measures and the choice of adhesives. Epoxy resin was preferred to acrylic resin owing to its better adhesion despite its lack of reversibility (Figure 4).
Minor cracks were also consolidated, any loose elements and broken parts were re-adhered and additional support provided, partly with the collaboration of craftsmen. Further guidance on (dis)assembling, handling and cleaning of the throne after the ceremony was provided to the museum.

Finally, idols such as the statue of Harishankara in the sanctum of the eponymous temple are charged with religious meaning and significance through daily use by worshippers making offerings. The Harishankara statue could not be surveyed or treated, as conservators were not allowed to enter the sacred sanctum. In the 2015 earthquake the Harishankara Temple collapsed and its idol broke into two pieces. Religious beliefs demand that an idol is intact to be worshipped, so the community had no more interest in the historic statue, which conservators re-joined and cleaned. A conventional treatment is therefore possible only when an idol has lost its connection to the living culture and community. The conservators and local community agreed to make a replica of the historic statue for believers’ religious practice. This replica is now situated in the sanctum of the reconstructed temple together with the conserved historic

Figure 3. The Golden Door with the water vessel and Buddha idol in front; during conservation treatment in 2018. © Institute of Conservation, University of Applied Arts Vienna.
Each conservation approach and intervention was negotiated and defined together with the KVPT. The KVPT in turn informs and consults the Department of Archaeology and representatives of the municipality and local community (the ward chairmen, district officers) through regularly meetings (Haselberger, Ranjitkar, and Krist 2021). Furthermore, the KVPT has close ties to UNESCO. In this way local voices as well as experts’ recommendations are combined to achieve results that balance local needs and international norms.

**Perspectives for conservation practice**

These examples emphasise the importance of considering and treating each object as an individual case, and of creativity in generating and adapting conservation approaches; both are distinctive strengths of conservation and part of professional practice. They also demonstrate that knowledge of not only the nature and significance of heritage, but also its use, are decisive for conservation professionals working within a living culture. This understanding can support discussion and decision-making, and identify whether options exist that balance the use and protection of heritage.

In Patan’s case the identification of such options would be benefited by detailed analysis and mapping of the use of built heritage, including not only institutional, but also commercial, residential, religious and recreational uses – as already suggested by Sekler (1985) – arising from intangible cultural heritage and cultural expressions.

Cultural mapping is one possible tool (Court and Wijesuriya 2015), defined as a ‘set of activities and processes for exploring, discovering, documenting, examining, analysing, interpreting, presenting and sharing information related to people, communities, societies, places and material products and practices associated with those people and places’ (Taylor and Cook 2012, 3), which ‘involves a community identifying and documenting local cultural resources’ (Taylor and Cook 2012, 31) – whether tangible and intangible – that are important to them or that they want to conserve. Methods such as social, cognitive or mind mapping are suggested. At the World Heritage site of Angkor for instance, historical maps and photos, datasets on tangible features and interviews were used to create a cultural landscape atlas, which illustrates the community’s connections to the environment (Taylor and Cook 2012, 128–129). It would be worth exploring whether cultural mapping could capture how tangible cultural heritage is used by the community, and what use is significant for them. Relating such collected data to maps generated in the process of the conservation condition survey (for example, mapping damage patterns on materials) could help to understand the current condition of an object or monument better. Such mapping can also enhance conservators’ practice through raising awareness of the way in which an object is used, enabling treatments to be adapted accordingly by designing them to accommodate surrounding activities that might otherwise impede treatment (for example, protecting frequently touched surfaces with coatings). Such knowledge can also help to identify uses that are not related to the site’s original function, irrelevant to the community’s connection to the site and have no value for intangible

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**Figure 4.** Throne of the Patan Kings after conservation, 2018. © Institute of Conservation, University of Applied Arts Vienna.
cultural heritage. Examples include inappropriate attachment of electrical installations, wires, billboards or lightning signs, which result from modernisation and uncontrolled urban growth.

Conservation within a living culture requires heritage use to be not only understood but also respected and supported. Conservation practices and recommendations for maintenance or handling could help to prolong the lifespan, economic viability and usability of objects that are continuously or temporarily an integral part of cultural activities (such as the Throne of the Patan Kings), avoiding the costs of manufacturing replicas. Swosti R. Kayastha, lecturer at Lumbini Buddhist University in Nepal and a colleague of the authors, reported in an online symposium that many ritual objects used by guthis are sometimes stored under unfavourable conditions (e.g. threatened by termites and damp). If objects are severely damaged, guthis must usually raise money to replace them. Conservators could support guthis and/or communities and minimise such costs by providing expertise on collection care, the identification of causes of deterioration and their mitigation.

The production of replicas is also a legitimate option for living heritage sites. This requires craftsmen with skills in, and knowledge of, traditional techniques, who can also help conservators with conservation measures such as partial replacements (of stone indents for example), reinforcement, seismic strengthening or reshaping. Living craftsmanship can also help

Figure 5. Harishankara idol with the small replica in front, inside the reconstructed Harishankara Temple; while both received offerings during the inauguration of the temple, only the replica will be worshipped in future. © Rohit Ranjitkar.
conservators understand original manufacturing and decoration techniques, for example through visiting sculpting, wood carving and fire-gilding workshops in Patan.

Conclusion

Working as a conservation professional within a living culture brings responsibilities as well as opportunities. Conservation interventions on objects, monuments and sites can affect associated living culture and vice versa. A thorough understanding of the heritage site’s function and its use by the community is indispensable. A fuller picture of a cultural heritage could be achieved by expanding the usual surveys carried out in conservation projects to include traditional practices and current use.

Collaboration between practitioners or bearers of tradition and conservation professionals is promising in the preservation of ritual objects that are used in cultural activities. Of course, such collaboration depends on both sides’ willingness to cooperate, but it has the potential to achieve equilibrium between heritage protection and heritage use. The same applies to craftsmen; collaboration is essential to achieve a balance between renewal of fabric through craftsmanship and preservation through conservation, which respects living culture and its tangible manifestations.

Through such collaboration, working within a living culture can be understood as an opportunity for conservation to foster diversity, inclusivity and participatory practice.

Notes

1. Guthis are associations of people with different responsibilities ranging from performing everyday rituals and caring for temples to the organisation of big events. The community-based guthi system in Nepal is unique and can be traced back to the fifth century CE. After nationalisation in 1964, its activities were reduced (Maharjan 2018).

2. FWF-funded research project ‘Discovering Patterns of Damage and Conservation Practice’, P33985-G, 2021–2023.

3. Accessed 4 April 2022. https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/121/.

4. See Oldfield 1880; Le Bon 1886 or Boeck 1903. Several drawings of Nepali architecture – for example by Raj Man Singh, collected by Brian Houghton Hodgson (1800–1894) – are also in the collection of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland.

5. The DANAM database, serving the Nepal Heritage Documentation Project, includes structured information about monuments’ histories, related objects and collections, anthropological data on religious and social activities, architectural details, maps, plans and drawings. Accessed 4 April 2022. https://nhdp-test.kjc.uni-heidelberg.de/.

6. International Summer School 2021, on Tangible Cultural Heritage – Intangible Cultural Heritage – Conservation, 23–24 September 2021, online, organised by the Institute of Conservation, University of Applied Arts Vienna.

Acknowledgements

We would further like to express our gratitude to the Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust, particularly Dr Rohit Ranjitkar, for ongoing support and Pat Sekler for enabling substantial archival research.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) [grant number P33985-G] and the Austrian Development Agency [grant number 2808-00/2015].

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