

# In Kathmandu

## After the Earthquake

### Restoring the architectural heritage of the Kathmandu Valley

A proposal for a series of short instructional films illustrating best restoration practice and crafts; that could in turn lead to **a film for broadcast that would also serve as a fund-raising tool.**

In 2015 an earthquake shuddered many of the ancient temples, pagodas, stupas, palaces and Durbar Squares of the medieval towns of the Kathmandu Valley to piles of rubble.

These were no relics of a bygone age but vibrantly alive with their original culture and spiritual significance, an essential part of the everyday lives of the people of the valley.



The earthquake has provoked an urgent debate as to what constitutes good restoration practice.

As a priority and at the suggestion of some of those involved in the massive task of rebuilding the architectural heritage of the Kathmandu Valley, Lighthouse Films, Simon Normanton, has been encouraged to make, and has offered his services and equipment pro bono to make, six or more short films affirming the vital importance of appropriate procedure and techniques to ensure

the integrity of the restoration work.

These could feature issues arising from the restoration of Changu Narayan a 1700 year old Hindu temple, of world heritage importance, on the edge of the Valley.

The Changu Narayan project combines restoration with community development ensuring a future for both people and the built environment that is central to their lives.

### Suggested subjects vying for a place include:

**Post-earthquake Assessments of Historic Structures – Rebuild or Repair:** Since the earthquake there has been extensive discussions concerning the correct approach to either repair, restore or to reconstruct historic structures; whether to use modern materials and technology to strengthen an otherwise weakened structure; or to forbid the use of any modern materials, especially the use of concrete.

Each historic structure is unique and therefore its condition poses conditions relative to its construction requiring special assessments and recommendations for repair by experienced conservators. This is a very important message that needs in very simple language to address the various individual and different approaches that can be taken and outlines the procedures that should be followed.

**Revival of Traditional Crafts:** Similar in many ways to the artisan guilds that existed in Europe since Medieval times, in Nepal families still retain a name that describes their profession and a few still practice their crafts. However with modernisation and dramatic changes in building styles, many of the crafts are fading away.

As a result of the 2015 earthquake, however, there is a desperate need to enhance conservation technology, and there are great opportunities for the revival of traditional crafts.

**3D Modelling of Temple Structures:** Another interesting topic that could be of interest as an awareness or training clip.

**Brick Making - The Traditional Slip Glazed Bricks:** The method of making the traditional brick (Chikan Appa) used during the Malla period to face all significant monuments was almost forgotten had it not been for an ambitious brick factory owner who has helped pioneer its revival.

**Wood Carving and Carpentry Traditions – Conservation and Repair Techniques:** There has been a renaissance in skills of woodcarving over the last ten years. However the quality of work in both new work and in repairing wooden structures needs improving.

In general, the process of finding suitable wood, the making and maintenance of tools the traditional methods of preparing, jointing, fixing and finishing woodwork all need to be researched and recorded for all woodworking activities and especially for wood carvers.

**Cleaning Woodcarvings – To Recolour or Leave Natural?:** There is a saying in Nepal that there are: “More gods than people and more temples than houses...” Therefore nearly all woodcarvings in the Kathmandu Valley are coloured. Some carvings have over nine layers of paint on them.

Traditionally in remote villages, the divinities were made recognisable to the less educated by painting them a specific colour. Surveys in many of the principle temples have proven that the gods no longer retain their appointed colour and that the multi-layers of colour were a simple way of restoring or maintaining the appearance of the temple concerned.

Any repair or conservation work to the woodcarvings will require in general, cleaning back to natural wood. However, before any decisions are made a proper analysis of the paint coatings needs to be undertaken to see if there exists the remains of any original paint.

**Traditional casting using the “Cire Perdu” or Wax Loss Process:** Often around important temples hanging from each rafter are wind bells with clappers from which hang leaf-shapes designed to catch the wind, creating a symphony of ringing bells. These bells are cast using the wax loss process.

A model of each bell cast is made of wax and then encased in a mixture of clay and rice husks which are left for several days to dry. At an appointed time the mould is heated to drain out the wax and the wax is replaced with an appropriate molten brass or bronze mix. The clay mould is then broken away revealing the bell which is then finished and the clapper and leaf are attached ready to be hung from each rafter. Most bronze or brass deities are cast in a similar way and these are often gilded with pure gold.

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John Sanday, conservation architect, with a temple pujari at Changu Narayan

**These short films could precipitate a broadcast/fund-raising film:**

This film would tell the story of the restoration of the architectural heritage of the Kathmandu Valley and of other damaged sites high in the Himalayas. It would explore, through the eyes and words of the people who live there, the swirl of ceremonies, procession, pilgrimage and prayer that is Nepal and which makes the restoration of these ancient buildings so important to them and to all of us.

Central to this film would be the restoration of Changu Narayan high on the lip of the valley, under the direction of a British architect, long resident in Kathmandu, in collaboration with the local people. Artists and artisans, wood carvers and guilders, the full panoply of medieval craftsmen must be enlisted and trained to restore that which was originally created so many centuries ago. It is an exciting project.

## NOTES

- Unesco has asserted that 'the ancient sites of the Nepal Valley are of the same importance to world heritage as are the Acropolis or Venice.'
- Simon Normanton has many years experience of making films, of a wide variety of subjects and styles, in many countries. They have been broadcast around the world. In 1976 he researched the BBC film, 'Kathmandu a Threatened Beauty', that first brought the global importance of the architectural heritage of Nepal to the world television audience.
- John Sanday, the conservation architect working on Changu Narayan, has established heritage projects throughout Asia, projects where the training of specialists and craftsmen in historic building conservation and repair, together with community development, has been his main focus. He is a good talker, speaks Nepali, and can provide ready access to people and issues.
- Simon Normanton has recently returned from an initial recce in Kathmandu where he spent several full days meeting people, visiting sites and discussing issues. He will be back in Nepal in October. Those concerned are very keen that these films should be made and have offered every support.
- There are engaging young Nepali contributors who speak excellent English.
- The issues of architectural heritage and individual identity will be a motivating theme.
- Lighthouse will fund all production costs of the short instructional films, looking only for modest funding to cover post-production.
- The production of the short films will provide excellent research time for the broadcast film.
- Prince Harry, who had a recent high-profile visit to Kathmandu, has sent us, through his father's office, his best wishes in our 'drawing attention to the amazing work that is going into restoring these historic sites'.

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