

Katmandu Valley Temples III

...all things fall and are built again...



It was clear to me when composing this tribute that Parts I and II would be followed by one more part, assuming I'd be in Nepal again - and, although I had no idea when, I knew I would.

Tourism and commerce in Nepal has experienced a marked downturn in the last year. The quakes are only one of the reasons. You see pockets of destruction; mostly, however, the infrastructure is intact, certainly in Katmandu and the valley. The residents go about their business; I, as tourist, generally was welcomed (or ignored, which is as good an indicator of acceptance) even when I wasn't contributing to this or that person's economic lifeline.

Although I didn't go out of my way to photograph scenes of destruction - enough photos are on the web - Katmandu Durbar Square, where I headed first, is missing its most prominent temples: less a scene of destruction than of loss. On that first day and subsequent days in Durbar Square, I stood near where I had stood in 2013 and photographed the scene that I had photographed before. The contrast from two years ago is stark.



In the first photograph set you can see, above, the 17th century Trailokya Mohan Narayan (Vishnu) temple on its platform, the small Bimaleshwor temple to the right, then Garuda, and the white stupa. In the 2015 photo, below, you see the plinth for the Narayan temple, an old brick building behind it, Bimaleshwor, Garuda, and a piece of the stupa's base.



In the set below, photo one shows the Bimaleshwor temple on the left, Garuda, the three story Maju Dega temple directly beyond, and the Narayan temple on the right.



In photo two, taken from the porch of the Bimaleshwor temple, you see Garuda and the high naked plinth of the Maju Dega temple. Photo three has the Maju Dega temple plinth with the temple's new identification sign.



In the set below, photo one,
are the Gaddi Durbar
palace and the east steps
of the Narayan temple.





In photo two, taken from a little to the right, you see the broken front of the palace, the back of Garuda facing the empty plinth of the Narayan temple, and the propped up Bimaleshwor temple.

Kasthamandap temple was built in the early 16th century with - according to legend - the wood from a single tree. In situ - although it's the focus of festivals and the source of the name Katmandu - it appears to be just one of many temples. You may not notice this until you see it missing, but in its location it contextualizes and completes Durbar Square.



Damage and, even more so, destruction may remove the temple, but it doesn't necessarily terminate the temple's use. The god is still present, as the residing statue, or even as the presence. To return to the Narayan temple, the statue of Vishnu - which presumably lived previously in the confines of the temple - is now in a favored spot at the top of the plinth. Here we see it framed by the back of Garuda, the vehicle of Vishnu.



In this case, taking away the temple allows access to the statue. You can tell, not only by the garland, but by the numerous powder marks, that many are climbing the steep ascent and interacting with the god.



A short walk from here, at the entrance to Nasal Chowk, the coronation hall of the old palace, is a revered Hanuman which, despite its access being hindered by framework supporting the walls, is actively worshipped.



Just to the right of Hanuman is Hanuman Dhoka (gate), the entry into Nasal Chowk, which is now the repository of some of the highly carved century's-old struts and other objects from the wrecked temples, which are being conserved as part of the restoration process.



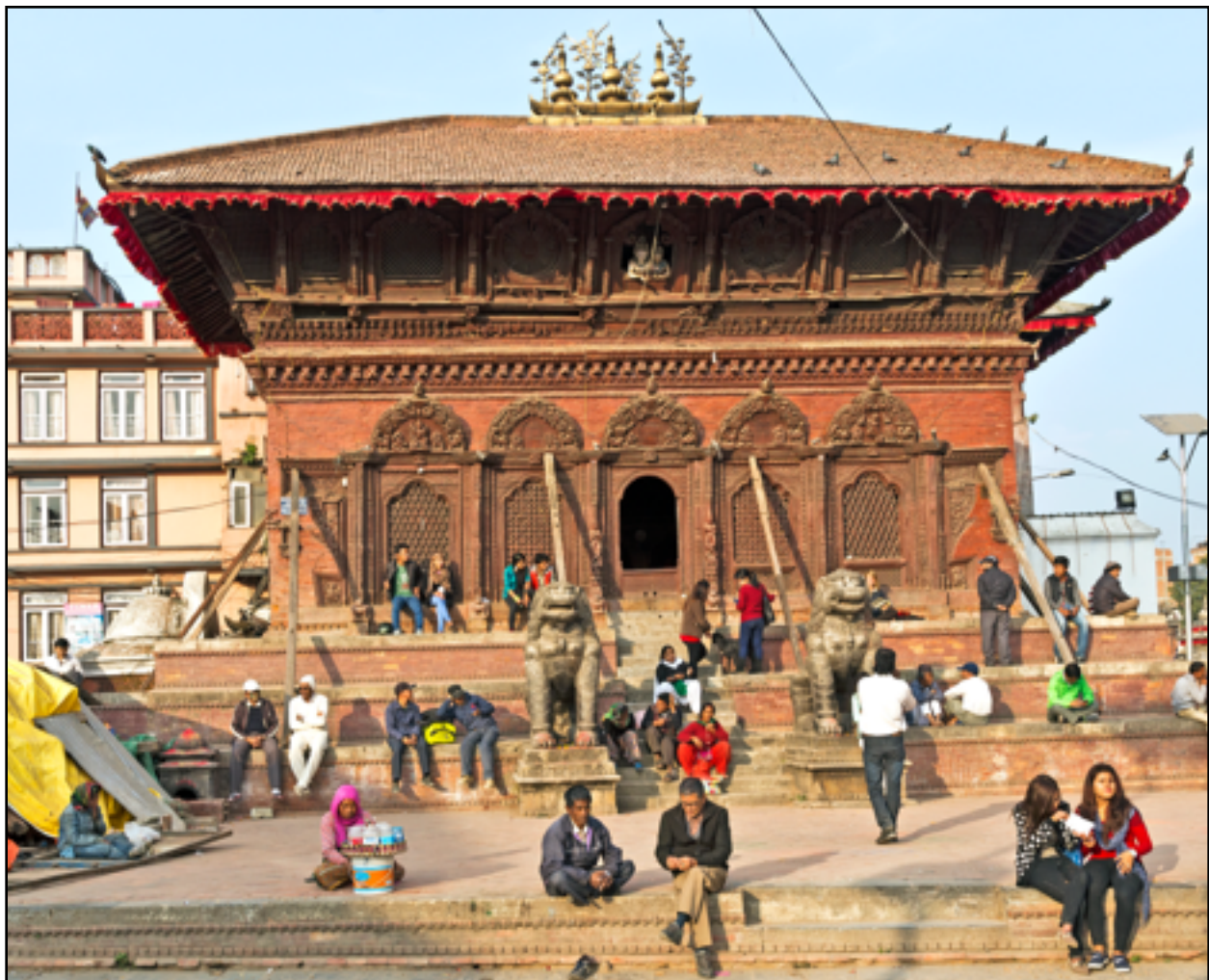
You can get in close and examine the work of master craftsmen; I felt privileged - as though I had been allowed to wander through the basement of a great museum or the workshop of an early Katmandu artist.



Also accessible is the rough carving at the bottom of the struts, probably done by an apprentice who, in ten or twenty years, would have become the new master.



Some of the temples in Katmandu and the surrounding cities are only moderately compromised. The Shiva and Parvati House temple, at the north edge of Durbar Square is propped up but functional; you can sit on the steps or climb to the porch without being chased by police. Inside was a priest engaged in a puja. The ceremony for young girls (see nepal 2015 photogallery) was held on the large front platform.



Many temples in Katmandu appear to be undamaged. For example, the Akash Bhairav temple in Indra Chowk, perhaps the busiest intersection in the city, carries its life-size bronzes as before.



The Maru Ganesh shrine, sitting across a narrow street from the north end of Kasthamandap temple - despite its small size and shabby appearance one of the most important and busiest Ganesh shrines in the valley - is much the same as it was before the quakes but visible now from the vacated Kasthamandap plinth.



**In another part of the city,
the dome of the famed Boudhanath Stupa was
cracked and is currently being restored. The
steeple has been removed, presumably while
repairs are made and, without the eyes and
spire, it looks like a large but ordinary dome.**





The glass enclosures of the painted statues of members of the pantheon in the lobby just as one enters the stupa perimeter were being unlocked and cleaned. A professional photographer was taking photos for, perhaps, a magazine, and he was gracious enough to let me capture the moment as well - who knows the last time these statues had been so viewable.





Durbar Square in Bhaktapur similarly lost some of its most precious temples - Bhaktapur's ancient houses also suffered. When I first heard about the destruction of the Katmandu temples I was sure that the five-tier Nyatopol temple must also have been leveled (see Part II for the 1998 photo). Happily here it is today.



Bhaktapur Durbar Square is a twenty minute taxi drive from my hotel in Katmandu. Because of the gas shortage rates were about three times the 2013 level, about \$25 for a round trip fare with two hours wait time - despite the surcharge, unreasonable only by past Katmandu standards.

You would have arrived at the attractive entrance gate and seen through it a wonderland of temples (1998 photo).



There is no longer an entrance gate. The entrance is framed by a welcoming sign and a commemorative photo.



Most noticeably missing in the inner compound is the Vatsala Durga temple, center in the 1998 photo. The temple stands out from a distance because it is stone and Shikhara-style while most of the temples are wood and pagoda-style.



When you get close - looking, for example, around the Taleju bell - you see the intricacy, delicacy, and ageless charm of the design and the carving, and you appreciate it even more.



The
steps,
the
plinth, a
single
elephant,
and a
pair of
lions are
all that
remain
intact.



At the top is a remnant of decoration filling in for the deity.



Lest we see this as a zone of total desolation, Vatsala Durga temple (the platform is on the lower left in the photo above and in front in the photo below) is surrounded by buildings many of which survived the quake, including the 55-window palace (rear, above and below), the octagonal Chyasilin Mandap, the stone 17th Century Siddhi Laxmi temple (center, distant), and (below) the Taleju bell.



The photo at the top of Part III - with its eight martial arms - is of a statue of Mahismardini at the Uma Maheshwar temple in Kirtipur, an ancient center of Newari culture on the southwest rim of the Katmandu valley.

Mahismardini is a manifestation of the destructive component of creation which - also in its female form - is known as Bhairavi or Durga. This manifestation of the terrible aspect of Shiva's "consort" Uma or Parvati, is part of the play of structure and movement, what we call relative existence or appearance in the context of the formless. In its male aspect it's known as Kala Bhairav, the awe-ful form of Lord Shiva.



Earthquakes are part of the process.
They level all temples over time.
Time does this itself,
of course.
As the impact of time,
and as time itself, Durga is known as Kali.
Note the play of words:
Kali, Kala Bhairav, Bhairavi:
they are the same;
they're all the same.
Kala in Sanskrit means "time".

Kali is the essence of
time but also beyond
time, the timeless one.
Nothing escapes time,
everything is eventually
dissolved. Except for the
essence.
Kali destroys the finite to
reveal the formless
absolute.

When you walk around the west side of the Vatsala plinth you'll arrive at the entry to the 55 window palace, known as the Golden Gate. Above the door is a frieze of Kali which speaks to the heart of our being.



This is the Kali of Consciousness.
The eight martial arms of Mahismardini
are now accessory appendages
to the pair of primary humanoid-positioned arms.

The left front hand
is in the shape of the prithvi mudra
which represents the root chakra
and is therefore symbolic of the whole human form,
of human existence.

The right front hand holds a vessel - a vessel always bears
something of worth.



Kali as the destroyer
of ignorance
has subordinated
Kali as time the destroyer.
The weapons are now aimed
at ignorance: the belief that who I am
is what this body likes, wants, owns, remembers, relates to,
or what I know through my senses and imagination.

The happening of Kali
takes place in her own nature which is
timelessness.
This is where darkness and ignorance
are seen to be illusory.
The message is: erase
the illusion of ignorance and
enjoy fullness of life.

Kali is often depicted with her tongue out and lolling.
This statue - curiously androgynous -
symbolizes the process of spiritual purification, where what once was
opaque gradually becomes transparent.
Kali licks us clean of the surface features of our life,
and leaves us with nothing that we're not - leaves us
as who we are, pure awareness.
Bhairavi the dread-ful leads us to liberation.



