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**Nepal Architecture Archive at Harvard University:  
Using Library Technology to Preserve Cultural  
Heritage and Take It into the Future**

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*Abstract*

In 1962 Harvard University Professor Eduard F. Sekler was traveling through India studying urban areas and the rapid changes brought upon them by modernization, when a chance conversation introduced him to a country and its architecture that would become one of his consuming interests for decades to come. Professor Sekler's interests in architecture and urban form were wide-ranging and were reflected in his publications and teaching at Harvard's Graduate School of Design, where graduate students are trained to become architects, landscape architecture, and urban planners and designers. Just prior to his 1962 visit to India, Sekler and then Dean Josep Lluís Sert had taught an urban design seminar on historic urban spaces. His extensive knowledge and the research done by their students was certainly fresh in Sekler's mind when a colleague in India suggested that he extend his travel itinerary and visit Nepal, on the northern border of India. His friend indicated that in Nepal's Kathmandu Valley Sekler would find a unique and virtually untouched urban form, the Darbar Square, the space in front of a royal palace that contains temples, shrines and rest houses for travelers and pilgrims. Sekler set out for Nepal and upon arriving immediately recognized the unique qualities of these urban spaces, combining influences of Hindu and Buddhist cultures from the 14<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

In the Kathmandu Valley there are three cities with historically and aesthetically significant Darbar Squares: the royal cities of Kathmandu, Patan, and Bhaktapur. The valley itself is a geographically very small area, equal to the size of a not very large city such as Vienna, where the Austrian Sekler had lived for many years. Professor Sekler remembered his first impressions in a recent conversation with me: "I fell in love with Patan Darbar Square. This Darbar Square I felt ought to be preserved because I knew it wouldn't survive unless it was protected, because progress was bound to come. In 1962 it wasn't yet very noticeable. There were very few cars, the culture was still very intact, the landscape was still beautiful, the rice terraces and bamboo groves, and in the background you had the mountains (the Himalayas). I mean, really, Shangri-La, lost paradise. [...] The man who persuaded me to go and look at it had told me, look at the architecture, and it was very exciting. And Patan Darbar Square, I said to myself, this is as good as any Italian hill town, where you find lovely urban spaces. So that was the beginning."

Sekler told his colleagues and students about what he had seen in Nepal and worked with others interested in the future of the Kathmandu Valley. In the early 1970s the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) funded a planning office in Nepal, and Carl Pruscha, a former student of Sekler's and an architect in Josep Lluís Sert's architectural firm, was selected to lead it. While planning for the future growth of the Valley, Pruscha was concerned about the historic structures. In 1975 he authored a two-volume government publication about the preservation of cultural heritage in the Kathmandu Valley with a notable subtitle: "a protective inventory".<sup>1</sup> Soon after, Pruscha requested from the United Nations an expert on historic conservation, and Sekler was chosen and sent on his first of many missions for UNDP and UNESCO. In 1977 he prepared a report for the government of Nepal titled *Master plan for the conservation of the cultural heritage in the Kathmandu Valley*.<sup>2</sup> The report's recommendations formed the basis for much future activity. Sekler emphasized the importance of designating monument zones and historic sites, making clear what needed to be preserved. In retrospect Sekler acknowledges that he was somewhat naïve, thinking that the report and its recommendations would lead to concentrated activity. He learned that it was not enough to make regulations, but that you really have to learn to understand the complex workings of the government and social systems, how you can get something done in that system, how you educate the

people in the area so that they have a shared interest in recommended goals. This process took many years.

Having made the master plan, Sekler suggested that certain sites should be specially treated. In 1972 the General Conference of UNESCO had established the World Heritage Site designation. This UNESCO programme aims to catalog, name, and preserve sites of outstanding cultural or natural importance to the common heritage of humankind. Nepal signed the convention and, after a visit by the UNESCO director general, seven sites in the Kathmandu Valley including the three Darbar Squares in Kathmandu, Patan and Bhaktapur were designated as World Heritage Sites. UNESCO proclaimed an international campaign and a sizable number of funds were raised. Contributions from Germany, Austria, Italy, and Japan among others helped significantly over the next decade. But most of the projects funded by these countries were each administered independently by the Nepal Department of Archaeology, and there were several disadvantages inherent in this arrangement. In addition to a lack of coordination among the projects, the most significant challenge was the lack of trained architects in the Department of Archaeology. There was more expertise in conserving works of art, not the historic structures that originally housed them. Lack of architectural expertise resulted in poor oversight in the planning and execution of some projects. Secondly, the Department had to pay very low authorized government rates to the craftsmen including builders, carpenters and carvers. In privately financed projects these craftsmen would get better pay. When there was competition the government projects got work of lesser quality. As a result, some restoration projects were poorly done and soon in need of repair themselves.

Meanwhile, Sekler and others continued to spread the word about the Kathmandu Valley and its endangered structures. In 1980 Harvard published Sekler's paper, *Proposal for the Urbanistic Conservation of Patan (Lalitpur) Durbar Square as a Monument*.<sup>3</sup> In this proposal Sekler detailed the chronological and bibliographic histories of activities and publications that advocated for the conservation of cultural heritage in the Kathmandu Valley. Several years later, one of his undergraduate students at Harvard, Erich Theophile, was planning to visit Nepal and Sekler gave advice on sites to visit. In 1987, twenty-five years after Sekler's first visit, Theophile had a similar reaction, not then realizing that conserving the unique architecture of the Kathmandu Valley would become his life's work. Sekler had introduced him to the Germans Götz Hagemüller and Niels Gutschow, an architect and scholar, respectively, then resident in Nepal who would become mentors and colleagues. Hagemüller directed the amazing restoration of the former royal palace in Patan Darbar Square, a project begun in 1982 and completed in 1997 and funded by Germany and Austria.<sup>4</sup> Theophile stayed in Nepal working with Hagemüller and Gutschow and spent several years volunteering for the Department of Archaeology, experience that would greatly benefit his future work.

Sekler and colleagues in Massachusetts had discussed the challenges of successful conservation work for the structures in the Kathmandu Valley. One colleague was Watson Dickerman, a Harvard College graduate and philanthropist who was very involved with the Save Venice campaign. From this association Dickerman had learned the advantages of working with a successful international non-governmental agency established to do non-profit, privately-financed conservation work in a foreign country. Other colleagues included Michael Witzel, a new professor of Asian languages at Harvard who Sekler had first met in Nepal, and Michael Doyle, one of Sekler's former teaching assistants who is today an architect in New York. They knew that Erich Theophile had decided to live in Nepal. In 1990

this nucleus group formed the Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust, a non-profit association registered in Massachusetts.

The KVPT started small, with Theophile as their man onsite in Nepal. Their first project in 1990 cost \$2,800 to fix the roof of a previous project that Watson Dickerman had funded, the Gokarna Parvati Temple. In the early years the Trust received small sums from people who had been to Nepal, seen the temples and shrines, and felt they should be preserved. Erich Theophile's experience with the Archaeology Department and guidance from Niels Gutschow had acquainted him with the range of local carpenters and carvers, and since the Trust wasn't restricted to paying the rates proscribed by the government they were able to hire the best craftsmen for their projects. The Trust was the first agency to do turnkey projects in Nepal, where they secured all the necessary funding prior to starting the project. The agenda of the Trust has been to do a series of model projects in consultation with a global network of experts and supporters, to establish a global dialogue, not to simply train Nepalese and turn the work over to them. There have been dozens of Nepali interns, as well as foreign students, trained by the Trust and now involved in building the network that carries the work forward. Since the establishment of the Trust in 1990, over 30 projects have been completed or are ongoing. The Trust is currently focused on the restoration of the complete palace complex in Patan Darbar Square. The main palace restored by Götz Hagmüller that now houses the Patan Museum is only the left wing of the complex. There are two more courtyards and a large tower to the patron deity of the royal house, along with a sunken garden behind the palace. Britain's Prince Charles hosted a reception in May to help the Trust raise funds for this project. In addition the Trust hopes to restore the "Garden of Dreams" in Kathmandu, and is seeking to expand their historic scope to include select 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century structures. The list of completed and ongoing projects is available on the Trust's website: <http://www.kvptnepal.org/>

Each project generates a wealth of documentation that is currently kept in an archive in the Trust's Nepali headquarters, located in Patan Darbar Square. Documentation types include historic structure reports, measured drawings of the structures before restoration, restoration plans, photographs (before, during and after restoration) as well as historic photographs of the sites. In addition there are documents tracking the progress of the work, bookkeeping, correspondence, and final reports for each project.

Several years ago the Trust approached the Frances Loeb Library at Harvard's Graduate School of Design, which I direct, and asked if we would consider becoming the archive's permanent home. The Trust's board members were concerned about threats to the contents of the archive from the natural environment; the archive is housed without any temperature and humidity controls. Political turmoil was an additional concern. The assassination of eleven members of the royal family, the new King Gyanendra's dissolution of the Parliament, and a Maoist insurgency all occurred during the period in which we were evaluating whether we would house the archive. It remains to be seen if the recent concessions by King Gyanendra and the reestablishment of the Parliament will bring long-term stability. The longstanding ties to Harvard of many Trust members and several of its founders were an additional factor that led the Trust to approach us. Erich Theophile is now the Executive Director of the Trust. Eduard Sekler, now Professor Emeritus at Harvard, is the Honorary Chairman Emeritus and Chief Technical Advisor of the Trust. But the strongest motivation for working with Harvard has been the University's vast library collections, the relationships with the Design School's librarians and their

organizational expertise, and the extensive infrastructure we have built to support traditional archival practice combined with digital access to collections. An important goal of the Trust is to make available information about their work through the Internet, while at the same time maintaining physical access to some parts of the archive in Nepal, and we had to assess whether we had the capability to support this goal. We valued the rich potential of having the materials in the archive, along with other collections, available for examination by researchers. We house the papers of Franziska Porges Hosken, the first woman to receive a master's degree in architecture from the Graduate School of Design in 1944, and the author of a 1974 book, *The Kathmandu Valley Towns*.<sup>5</sup> Professor Sekler's papers documenting his Nepal interests and work will come to the University, and scattered throughout the libraries at Harvard are a wealth of publications documenting the history and cultural heritage of Nepal which will provide essential support to researchers using the Trust papers.

In 1999 Mary Daniels, the Librarian for Special Collections at the Design School, traveled to Nepal to assess the collection.<sup>6</sup> Daniels did a preliminary examination that provided a sense of the size and complexity of the archive. It is estimated that the archive currently contains over 500 measured drawings and over 1000 contemporary and historic photographs documenting the project sites. Daniels will return to Patan in October where she will compile a detailed inventory of the archive. We concluded an agreement at the beginning of the year to house the archive in Loeb Library's Special Collections Department. We concluded that with the use of available technologies, and with fundraising support from the Trust, we will be able to provide access to copies of the drawings and photographs in Nepal and also, through the Internet, around the world.

Documentation of completed projects will be the first material to come to the Library. . Our librarians will catalog the materials using Harvard's online catalog for manuscript and archival material, called OASIS. The flexible catalog structure provides for cataloging at varied levels, ranging from box or folder descriptions to detailed item-level records. Material will be searchable by project name and geographic location, dates (creation/restoration), material type, and numerous subject access points. The archive will be stored in the climate-controlled Harvard Depository, a secure storage facility from where materials are delivered to our reading room within 24 hours. The detailed cataloging in the online OASIS catalog means that materials can be requested and be ready for examination in our reading room the day the researcher arrives in the Library.

All of the drawings and many of the photographs will be scanned at high resolution, using equipment that the Library has recently installed for our ongoing digitization program. We can digitally photograph drawings up to 60 x 40 inches, three-dimensional objects (and there are examples of the intricate decorative carving used in conservation projects in the collection), and create high-quality reproductions of the contemporary and historic photographs in the archive. To create a parallel archive for use in Nepal, copies of the drawings and photographs will be produced and returned to the Trust's office in Patan Darbar Square, for use by visiting researchers and employees of the Trust working on current projects.

Perhaps the most valuable result of this project will be the creation of a website that points to all of the components of the archive: the detailed finding aid, the digital scans of the measured drawings, the contemporary and historic photographs, the historic structure reports, restoration plans, and the final reports, along with other relevant items in Harvard's collections. Harvard's Office for Information Systems (OIS) has worked during the past eight years to build a digital

infrastructure that supports all of the document types in digital format. The digital files, captured as high resolution TIFF images, are stored in Harvard's Digital Repository Service. They can be delivered as both thumbnail images and JPEG2000 images. Library researchers can zoom in on details in the JPEG2000 images, which will be delivered through the OASIS catalog for archival material, and may also be made available in Harvard's VIA catalog, the University's union catalog for images held in the libraries and museums at Harvard. The final reports will be cataloged in both the OASIS catalog and in HOLLIS, Harvard's online catalog for books and periodicals.

We are working with Harvard's Office for Information Systems (OIS) to identify the best website vehicle to bring the archive to researchers in a format that enhances their understanding of the work of the Trust, and we are considering several options. OIS has created a tool called "Virtual Collections", which allows librarians to create a website comprised of the cataloging records for a particular subject from the variety of online catalogs at the University. So, our Nepal Architecture Archive could include records from HOLLIS, VIA, and OASIS that are not only from the Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust Archive in Loeb Library, but also materials about the Kathmandu Valley and Nepal that are already in any of these catalogs. For example, all of the reports by Professor Sekler that I have mentioned, and others concerning the topic, could be pulled together as a virtual collection on this website. The disadvantage with this tool is that one cannot insert additional text. Only the catalog descriptions from the Harvard catalogs will appear on the site. Therefore, we may consider using another tool created by Harvard's systems librarians called a templated database (or TED). This tool allows the creation of a website with information from not only the catalog records for materials in our collections, but also text created to enhance those descriptions or to provide additional information about the cultural heritage of Nepal. The disadvantage with this tool is that the information is not pulled automatically as the result of a search command, as in the Virtual Collections tool, and therefore it must be updated is not as efficient. One factor in deciding to pursue this type of website will be the commitment of faculty members and librarians to maintaining the intellectual content of the site. At the recent annual conference of the Art Libraries Society of North America in Banff, Alberta, I saw a demonstration of a very interesting mapping tool that may provide an additional structural consideration for our website. Developed by the Center for Educational Resources at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland, this Interactive Map Tool allows librarians to create a spatial organization of material about a particular site or a group of sites. This visual geographic organizing approach is very attractive when thinking about how to effectively present documentation of adjacent World Heritage Sites like those in the Kathmandu Valley. The Johns Hopkins developers plan to release a freeware version of this software in 2007, allowing us time to explore its possibilities as an effective organizational tool.

The Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust archive will take several years to process, but the results will provide the potential for increased access to the unique, historic urban spaces that have so charmed those fortunate enough to have traveled to Nepal. Most of us may never have the chance to make that trip, but with the opportunities offered by the evolving information technologies being utilized in libraries, we will be able to see the beauty of this threatened cultural heritage and understand the urgency driving those committed to its preservation. I look forward to contributing to that effort.

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<sup>1</sup> Kathmandu Valley, the preservation of physical environment and cultural heritage: a protective inventory / prepared by His Majesty's Government of Nepal in collaboration with the United Nations and UNESCO [coordination and production: Carl Pruscha]. – Vienna: Schroll, 1975.

<sup>2</sup> Sekler, Eduard F. Master plan for the conservation of the cultural heritage of the Kathmandu Valley. – Paris: UNESCO, 1977.

<sup>3</sup> Sekler, Eduard F. Proposal for the urbanistic conservation of Patan (Lalitpur) Durbar Square as a monument zone. -- Cambridge, Mass.: Graduate School of Design, Harvard University, 1980.

<sup>4</sup> Hagmüller, Götz. Patan Museum: the transformation of a royal palace in Nepal / Götz Hagmüller with contributions by Shaphalya Amatya ... [et al.]. -- London: Serindia, published in association with the Patan Museum, 2003.

<sup>5</sup> Hosken, Fran P. The Kathmandu Valley towns; a record of life and change in Nepal. – New York: Weatherhill, 1974.

<sup>6</sup> Daniels, Mary. "Nepal: a preliminary excursion". In: ICAMNEWS (International Confederation of Architectural Museums), January-June 2001 issue, pp [1-3].