

Conceptualizing an Open Living Museum Beyond Musealization in the Context of a Historic City: Study of Bhaktapur World Heritage Site, Nepal

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Abstract—Museums are enclosed buildings encompassing and displaying creative artworks, artefacts and discoveries for people’s knowledge and observation. In the context of Nepal, museums and exhibition areas are either adaptive to small gallery spaces in residences or ‘neo-classical palatial complexes’ that evolved during the 19th century. This study accepts the sparse occurrence of a diverse range of artworks and expressions in the country’s complex cultural manifestations within vivid ethnic groups. This study explores the immense potential of one such prevalence beyond the delimitation of physical boundaries. Taking Bhaktapur World Heritage Site as a case, the study perpetuates its investigation into real-time life activities that this city and its cultural landscapes ensemble. Seeking the ‘musealization’ as an urban process to induce museums into the city precinct, this study anticipates art-space into urban spaces to offer a limitless experience for this contemporary world. Unveiling art as an experiential component, this study aims in conceptualizing a living heritage as an infinite resource for museum interpretation beyond just educational institute purposes.

Keywords—Living museum, site museum, musealization, contemporary arts, cultural heritage, historic cities.

I. INTRODUCTION

MUSEUMS are generally enclosed spaces or buildings for curating and exhibiting artefacts and elements of artistic, cultural, historical and scientific value to people. They relate more to public-oriented activities like displaying and viewing the artefacts curated in an exhibition area. In Nepal, the history of museums goes back to the year 1926, called Shilkhana Museum, the building to house arsenals secured by the then Prime Minister Bhimsen Thapa [1]. This building was later renamed to Nepal Museum in 1938 and made open to the public in the year 1939, which is now called as Nepal National Museum [1]. Nevertheless, the country is enriched not only by historical assets but also by social, cultural, natural and scientific resources. Despite the abundantly prevailing rich historical and cultural resources in the country, the history of museum development is relatively very short [1]. However, museum development in Nepal as educational institutes intended to introduce Nepal and its cultural richness to the international community through establishments [1]. The museums thereafter are limited just to conventional approaches of recalling the memories of the past with passive displays inside a designated building or built palatial complex. In Nepal, the definition of a museum and its outreach into different

aspects is only around the historical and archaeological precinct. Beyond that, no further progress in terms of museology and its aspects like museum architecture, management and artworks creation is noticeably made, while the world attains contextualization of museums with contemporary characteristics at present. Taking Bhaktapur¹ as a reference, it has often been described as an open living museum due to its rich cultural avenue, social values and grandeur of built environment by many researchers and intellects in Nepal but not formally enacted. They are the form of art that becomes inseparable from people’s lives like the festivals, rituals and everyday practices. The physical built environment is where these activities occur openly in squares, courtyards, streets, temples, shrines, monumental buildings and so on. Both of these collectively form the notion of cultural heritage in Bhaktapur that are piled up into historic layers from centuries [2]. Furthermore, Cultural heritages are foreseen as contributors to the economy in any place [3]. Since the opening of Nepal to the world in 1951, tourism activities gradually flourished in the country bringing people from different parts of the world [4]. Such tourism introduces as ethnic tourism where tourists encounter unfamiliar or exotic ethnic groups with their society and culture’s material and performative elements [5]. In [3], Aykac claims that historic areas catering to such tourism have developed taking the form of living museums. However, these kinds of museums are criticized as reminiscent of colonially inspired and radicalized human zoos of yore for being a matter of “imperial entertainment” and “imperial science” [6], [7]. Along with the increment of tourism, there have also been lots of reform and regeneration works in the historic areas and settlement sectors in Nepal. Bhaktapur had undergone a citywide redevelopment project i.e. Bhaktapur Development Project for its prosperity in the 70s in collaboration with GTZ [8]. Therefore, this study intends in highlighting the potential of presenting the city of Bhaktapur as an Open Living Museum and investigates the challenges that it has to face in the future.

II. CONTEXT OF BHAKTAPUR AS A WORLD HERITAGE SITE

Bhaktapur is located at 12 km east of the capital city Kathmandu, Nepal. Bhaktapur is known as the gem of folk dances, musical performances, festivals, rituals and every-day activities in the magnificent historical built environment with minutely and detailed artworks and craftsmanship made into

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¹ An old ancient capital within the Kathmandu valley, Nepal.

wood, stones, terracotta and metal as in Fig. 1: (a) Wooden and Bronze torana with carpentry and metal engravings, (b) Skyline of City of Bhaktapur with Nyatapola, (c) Stone engravings on a Buddhist mandapa [9].



Fig. 1 (a) Wooden and Bronze torana with carpentry and metal engravings



Fig. 1 (b) Skyline of City of Bhaktapur with Nyatapola



Fig. 1 (c) Stone engravings on a Buddhist mandapa



Fig. 2 (a) Worshippers' offering turned into cuisine art at public



Fig. 2 (b) Madhava Narayan fasters group performing their ritual



Fig. 2 (c) Masks made public for Navadurga festivals

Many scholars and intellectuals concerned about Bhaktapur advocated for executing the concept of 'Cultural Capital' with respect to this city [2]. Though this concept did not come into realization due to political and administrative circumstances, the people believe it's contextual. Out of the three major urban centres in Kathmandu Valley, Bhaktapur did not transform much from the earlier city structure and intangibilities [10]. The present Bhaktapur is a medieval town inherited from the 'Malla' ² dynasty though it has historic layers of the

² Malla: Ruling dynasty in Nepal from 12th to 18th century [24].

predecessors from since the 'Kirat' ³ and 'Lichchhavi' ⁴ dynasties [10]. During the 1934 earthquake, most of the monuments and traditional buildings in the city were destroyed. Renovation and restoration works however could not occur in a fruitful manner [9]. In 1979, Bhaktapur, along with other six sites in Kathmandu Valley (KV), has been designated the World Heritage Sites (WHS) in an integrated manner [2].

The feeling like getting into a sacred pilgrimage area while entering the WHS is a unique feature of this site. Another significant feature is the glance of dense artefacts and monument buildings within a small area. Such a feature makes it synonymous with an Open Living Museum. The ancient religious and cultural activities along with festivities and rituals still form the spatial realities at present making this area a living museum. Every day, thousands of visitors enjoy the arts, crafts and architecture of these monuments. These monuments on one hand reveal high-class masterpiece art examples and on the other hand, offer a privilege of Nepalese identity. Therefore, it is one's responsibility to conserve and preserve the historical artefacts for their antiquity and authenticity.

An American author, Edward Alexander Powell in [11, pp. 216-217] describes this city as;

"...were there nothing else in Nepal save the Durbar Square of Bhatgaon (Bhaktapur), it would still be amply worth making a journey halfway round the globe to see."

Therefore, it can be confirmed that the city of Bhaktapur has immense assemblage of historical and cultural assets in place for people to experience and participate in real time situation.

III. NECESSITY OF LIVING MUSEUM IN HISTORIC CITIES

In [9], Bigol states that there are several ethnological museums associated to various themes depicting ethnography in Bhaktapur like wooden crafts, metal crafts, art works, etc. These museums are the primitive forms displaying the various artefacts from different timeline. Primitive museums are mostly criticized for 'active communication' over 'passive communication' while entertaining the visitors and educating them [12]. Such museums are more material centric and adopted a 'traditional dormant display method' [12]. In the 1950s, the introduction of the term 'site museum' takes the museology trends to the next level of active communication [13]. This technique of active communication brings much positive impact on museum visitors and their satisfaction level, comprehending the displays of collections into their seemingly original settings either historical, archaeological or cultural sites [12]. Furthermore, she argues that such museums incorporate the human aspect of the sites to help the public to comprehend the lifestyles of that period, by allowing them to retrieve history and relate it with their current living. Whatsoever is claimed, the notion of 'site museums' is still confusing because of the overlapping definitions and theoretically unaccounted forms which ultimately mislead the visitors and enthusiasts in museums [13]. In [12], Shafernich further denotes 'site museum' with other names like living

³Kirat: The Kirats were the aborigines of north-eastern Himalayas who came to Nepal in about 700 B.C. and ruled over it [24].

museum, outdoor museum, open air museum, in situ museum, etc. being based on thematic approach of operation. However, the major drawbacks being the artificial setup to bring apparent feeling of realness can mean different from literal meaning of museums at all [13]. In another words, these kinds of museums take thematic approach to reveal history of certain place and time from an archaeological perspective through monuments and their preservation [12].

Since the "theme park fever" of the late 1980s, living museums have flourished in the Asia-Pacific region [14]. In this globalized world through regeneration, there have been efforts of expanding museum concepts to historic cities as widely encouraged practices [3] apart from just thematic expressions.

IV. MUSEALIZING HISTORIC CITY TO 'OPEN LIVING MUSEUM'

The idea of extending museums to city level is not a unique conception. These thoughts rose in many places of the world especially into historic places when undergo a massive regeneration or conservation projects [3]. Taking advantage of sparsely occurring historic and cultural entities as economy generating strategy, tourism becomes an important aspect to think for sustainability of cultural heritage preservation sector. As had been in Bhaktapur Development Project [8], the built environment of the city was improvised redeveloping exclusive monuments and infrastructural development along with some thematic museums. The project at its backstage had tourism in mind by then, since Nepal was already open to the world. At present, tourism is the main source of revenue in this town, which during the recent COVID-19 crisis retarded the economy drastically [15]. In the context of regenerating historic cities for their sustainability, many scholars criticize tourism to deplete the authenticity in cultural heritage discourse. However, this study provokes musealization as a process to dissolve the physical enclosure of museums and extend it to city precinct focusing on mechanism to transform artworks and cultural entities to consume as city life realities [3]. Similarly, in [16] Rossi underlines historic monuments acting, as museums are inefficient in connecting city life with museums calling them 'pathological permanences'. He further promotes 'musealization' as the process that triggers to transformation of historic cities for which entities are conceptualized as cultural heritage inducing physical 'recontextualization/decontextualization' [16].

V. DISCUSSIONS

A. City as a Museum

"Everyone shapes the city every day with almost everything they do. It would be like if a painter picked up his brush to dab the canvas and a thousand hands grabbed the brush with him to decide just where the paint is to go." [17, p.2]

In case of Bhaktapur, several thematic museums are the outcomes of musealization process transforming/adapting ancient priest houses into frozen archaeological museums. They

⁴ Lichchhavi: Ruling dynasty in Nepal from 450 AD to 750 AD [24].

have neither been able to draw attention of local community nor been able to contribute in city's substantial economy growth. Unlikely to these museums, 'Taragaon Museum'⁵ as an instance for 'architecture as a metaphor' [18] is one among many modern attempts to revealing city's identity and imagery into a building complex. It can be understood that a museum architecture could give a notion of the city complexity within a single building/museum as a monumental structure. However, that impression is limited only into the architectural features of the building but not into the essence of museum and deficits to become a part of urban system. Such effort only freezes the enliven city space and realities despite of rigorous attempts to resemble the city through musealization. In the museology discourse with art-space as a concern, we generally think of museums as buildings and institutions within a city but with the advent of this idea of open Living Museum, it is idealistic that an entire city can also be a museum in itself [3]. Regardless of the fact that contemporary museums in different parts of the world have been successful in portraying the identity of city and its culture in a metamorphic approach, Open Living Museum is beyond city representation. However, [19] interrogates the possibility of creating spatial sense in city spaces through recent museums that have transformed their outreach from traditional role to socially active enrollment [20] into cities.

B. Experiencing the Real-time Performance and Display

The display of the material culture in museums has remained prominent for quite a long time. So, the present status of museums around the world would indicate that 'site museums' abundantly outnumber other forms of museums. While the contemporary ideas for redefining museology have a different perspective from the conventional horizontal and linear discipline of displaying and viewing the artworks. These ideas ultimately seek attraction for local and foreign visitors to experience cultural alterity as a theme [14].



Fig. 3 Foreigners participating happily in the Saparu procession

With respect to the various museum forms discussed earlier, an Open Living Museum engages the real-time performances that happen at times in different spatial territories of the historic

city. In Fig. 3, a couple of foreigners is shown which played in their own way and participated actively throughout the entire procession during the *Saparu festival*⁶, which lasted for almost 4 hours. Unlikely the institutional organization in the living museum, here the procession was a necessary ritual for one of the families to organize it. In this case, the Open Living Museum is not a bound to any sort of city level plan nor it is associated to any institution. Though such functions and rituals are temporal, the participants could delightfully take part and experience it. In the Open Living Museums, it is not necessary for all cultural entities and artworks to be a commodity to consume with due respect to their cultural value.

C. Overarching Publicness into 'Cosmopolitan Aesthetic Experience'

To enter the city of Bhaktapur, the foreigners have to pay the entry fees. The SAARC country nationals have to pay 5\$ and other nationals have to pay 15\$ as an entry fee [15]. This initiation taken by the Municipality has been criticized for many subsequent years for commodifying the historic cities by other municipalities' administration. In fact, Bhaktapur Municipality has acknowledged that much of the revenue it generates from tourism is ultimately utilized for the city welfare like health, education and sanitation. On the other way round, when it comes to art, it is not just about art being the metaphors of cultural identity alone but also about 'cosmopolitan aesthetic experience' [21]. Unlikely to the proclamation of commodifying cultural property, the condition of ownership in private domain over the arts, it is a significant approach supporting the cultural minority in this global arena. This approach of Open Living Museum demonstrates the fundamentals of positive cosmopolitanism, which [26] highlights as one of the modern museology tactics by demonstrating an overarching publicness extending into the territory of cosmopolitanism. Furthermore, in [21] Busse also acknowledges about direct and more democratic involvement of art creators, viewers/visitors and the objects used by them to ascertain inclusion other than imagining museums as merely the elitist's gaze in a neo-museology perspective. In this regard, the Open Living Museum demarks itself beyond not only the notion of local entity, but also a system that depicts the state of art influencing participation to the next level. In other words, this idea enables participants engage in a way that institutions and government bodies cannot offer, integrating high culture to everyday life with fun and transferring opinions, an urban connoisseurship establishment [17] into every aspect of the city.

D. Rituals as the Curatorial Features

While advocating for the Open Living Museum, the first thing in the impression to scholars of museology is the devoid of a formal curatorial mechanism. Into the prime nexus of art museums curatorial becomes centric in canon formation/generation, which mostly deals in managing the artefacts and art-spaces. However, living museum being more into

⁵Taragaon museum is an adapted museum located at Baudha in Kathmandu district designed by a foreign architect, Carl Pruscha as an entertainment center for hippies in 70s [25].

⁶Saparu festival is the procession in the city by the families commemorating the passed ones on that specific year.

ethnological doctrine, the cultural canon when it reaches the openness into community level, exemption from the authoritative responsibilities to interpret the art objects/displays is advantageous. With this, an imagination of the team and staffing from an institutional mechanism for facilitating the stage/canon [22] is obsolete. The community performers are themselves the curators, as the cultural emplacements stage into the city from since a long run. In fact, the community takes care of the cultural canon that happened in such a historic city themselves in order to continue their costume regardless to this canon a commodity for tourism. In this glance at Fig. 4, an individual family with the support of the community prepares/curates such rituals in the street, while the participants generally are from the entire town. Such kind of rituals along with exhibitions as in Fig. 2, though temporary in nature requires a full set of community involvement to accomplish the ritual. The open living museum in this aspect enables numerous cultural exhibitions that are actually a part of city life. Here, urban connoisseurship is within the cultural groups within the communities of the city especially historic in character that particularly is able to generate a tangible urban experience [17].



Fig. 4 Ihi ceremony happening on the street



Fig. 5 An open convocation of musical performance lessons by a community

E. A New Dimension: Education, Exhibition and Experience

In one hand, the new age of museums decipheres the critical rethinking about the multitude of actors in play and their complex relationships with the museum perceived. On the other

hand, it seeks quality enhancement in contemporary museums through personal experience immersed with spontaneous information and validation.

“Such experience is, then, essential to the creation of a knowledge of values, which, in today’s complicated environment, is essential for the future of our society.” [23, p.59]

In Fig. 5, the graduates are taken around the entire town and at each node where there is a shrine or a deity, they would perform what they have learnt. This act not only educates the young learners to perform publicly but also demonstrates the re-enchanted environment when the public participates with the melody. On the other side, the public involvement in these acts also ensures the real taste of music from the performances and even enables them to learn musical notation of a different context. It is however questionable that the cultural context alone of the historic city meets the ‘topical information’ [23] that the modern society now demands. However, such information with deep pedagogical effect is responsible for successful development of individual and society consequently [23]. In other words, dissipating this kind of information about the artworks, experiences and values for participants is not only an education with practical knowledge and technology but also the knowledge of value embedded into these neo-museology elements. For doing so, the modern museums should bring artworks and performances together with experiments into the visitors’ programme that requires workshops and open art-space. Nonetheless, the Open Living Museum idealized into historic cities are with surplus of such environment prevalently from inheritance.

VI. CONCLUSION

In a global debate in the museology discourse, it is confirmed that museums have no objectives to foster ‘conservatories and mausoleum characteristics’ [23]. Similarly, living museums arose in different geographies but limited to a specific site although they argue for creating live facilities for the visitors to entertain. Living museum coined in different terms is merely just an ethnic theme park or an object of tourists’ gaze [14]. Furthermore, Open Living Museum has its connotation as the ‘city as the museum’, the best part is; one can interpret the city and participate into realities to transform it. To take this concept of city as a museum in an extended prospect is equally challenging as this kind of museum appears unstable and temporary with networks of connections as the city is always changing [22]. To embrace this kind of museum is to adapt musealization process resonating with the urban process and is being continually performed making relationships between people with realization that they entirely are the part of the museum. This process no matter considers the ‘cosmopolitan aesthetics experience’ to ensure the organized public (foreigners and locals) entertain the live art expressions in the city. Besides, it also highlights the necessity of the communities’ role in regularizing their rituals and cultural events along with their usual upkeep of artwork in the background i.e. monuments intact in their urban setting. Ultimately, the entire process of museum extension to unfold necessitates a system of

juxtaposing and contextualizing the education about contemporary museum where knowledge, experience and exhibitions meet.

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