The Nyatapola Temple in Bhaktapur, Nepal is the tallest, most prominent feature of the city skyline and is one of the many individual 'monuments' inscribed within the Kathmandu Valley World Heritage Site. Nominated in 1979; the Kathmandu Valley WHS is a collection of seven monument zones, among the earliest inscriptions from South Asia to the UNESCO World Heritage list. The site consists of three Durbar Squares of the historic capital cities of Kathmandu, Patan (Lalitpur) and Bhaktapur and four sacred ensembles - Swayambhu,
Bauddhanath, Pashupatinath and Changu Narayan. The Bhaktapur Durbar Square, along with the Nyatapola Temple is simultaneously an international tourist destination, a symbol for local identity and inextricably linked to the daily lives, livelihoods, and religious practices of the city’s inhabitants.

Nyatapola literally translated means ‘five roofs’ referring to the five towering storeys that make up the temple. Our intervention, drawing from the temple’s name, will describe five lesser-known stories of the Nyatapola, dealing with themes of inclusion and exclusion as well as practices of care and celebration. Our objectives are three-fold. First, we seek to expand the narrative of the Nyatapola, and by extension of Bhaktapur Durbar Square as a living, breathing place that cannot be confined to conceptions of physical monumentality,
architectural value, and historicity alone. Rather, the Nyatapola is both the physical and metaphorical centre of the city. Second, we intend to delve into ideas of inclusion and exclusion, going beyond simple binaries of Global North and South, global and local, heritage and every day. For instance, while the temple steps and platforms are part of the vibrant public space of the city, the interiors of the temple remain inaccessible to most of its residents, the deities hidden from public view. For minority communities in the city, the temple is simply a tourist landmark. Third, the Nyatapola, over three hundred years old has weathered several catastrophic earthquakes in its lifetime, more or less intact, including the recent Gorkha Earthquake in 2015. We contend that its continued survival is not merely a testament to its architectural and structural design, as is often described in official narratives and reports, but the outcome of centuries of care. Most recently, these local practices of care were illustrated by the scores of women volunteers who rallied together to repair the roofs of the temple as part of a large-scale preservation project.

Figure 3 Women in Bhaktapur volunteering to repair the roofs of the Nyatapola Temple in April-May 2020 (Source: Nepali Times)

We will present five stories in the form of illustrated comic-style narratives, drawing attention to the entwined lives of people and the temple. Nyatapola is not simply a heritage monument or a symbol, or even a temple; it is a multiplicity of meanings and associations for Bhaktapur’s residents. Following the earthquake, the temple has acquired new meanings, through its continued survival, but also through its renewal. Through richly drawn graphical illustrations we intend to create stories that are accessible to both locals and
tourists and which may be seen as an additional practice of care for the Nyatapola Temple and the Bhaktapur Durbar Square.

**Biographies**

We are three South Asian women who represent different degrees of privilege and marginalisation, similar to the stories we have chosen to highlight. Vanicka Arora is an Indian citizen, trained as an architect, currently pursuing her doctoral research at Western Sydney University. Her research engages with post-disaster reconstruction practices in Bhaktapur, Nepal. She navigates multiple degrees of being an outsider in both her field of study (Bhaktapur) and her university (Australia). Promina Shreshtha is an illustrator, visual artist and visual arts researcher, based in Kathmandu. Her research explores contemporary art forms in Nepal and children's book illustrations and their impact on formative identities. Promina’s heritage is Russian and Nepali, which means that she must often navigate being perceived as an outsider in her home country. Samriddhi Prajapati is a cultural researcher, content writer and translator born and raised in Bhaktapur with a Masters in English Literature. As a young woman in Bhaktapur, deeply engaged with the city, Samriddhi has recently begun to critically look at issues of feminism, modernity and tradition and how they may be reconciled.
The Nyatapola Temple has never collapsed...not in this Earthquake, not in 1934. All the other temples... see how dilapidated they have become after the Earthquake! But this one (the Nyatapola) is special. They say it goes down five stories underground too!

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Nyatapola literally translated means ‘five roofs’ referring to the five towering storeys that make up the temple. Drawing from the temple’s name, we describe some popular myths, and some lesser-known, sometime contradictory, stories of the Nyatapola Temple.

A TEMPLE IN FIVE STORIES
The Nyatapola Temple, Bhaktapur, Nepal

P. Lage, a mason in her sixties
BUILDING THE NYATAPOLA TEMPLE

Detailed descriptions of the temple’s construction process are available in the manuscript ‘Siddhagni Kotyahuti Devala Pratista’ housed in the National Archives of Nepal, parts of which have been translated and summarised by archaeologist Sukra Sagar Shreshtha (2005). According to this record, the temple was commissioned by Bhupatindra Malla in late 1701 AD (NS 822) and the construction of the temple was completed in a matter of months, with the consecration of the deity and the installation of the gajur (pinnacle) conducted in June 1702 AD. Each stage in the construction process, from the initiation ritual sacrifice conducted by Bhupatindra Malla himself, to the laying of the foundation stone and the completion of each roof are detailed in a series of 50 steps, accompanied by a series of poojas and rituals.

As prescribed in the Devmala, after building the temple of Nyatapola, King Bhupatindra Malla dedicated the first power to goddess Bhawani following all tantric rituals.

After the temple was built, Bhaktapur’s resident god, Bhairav appeared in the King’s dream and said, “Oh great King, you have dared to build a temple larger than mine! I cannot accept this impudence! The temple must house a most powerful goddess who I can worship as well!” So, the king followed Bhairav’s order and established the statue of Siddhilakshmi in the temple.

(Approximate translation from KaarnKala Rahasya by Dhan Shumsher, p.120).

The temple of Nyatapola, as we know today, was not really built during King Bhupatindra Malla’s period. A temple was already there. The king only reconstructed a temple which was done within a seven month period.

S. Shakya, an art enthusiast in his sixties
The temple houses the Hindu tantric goddess Siddhilakshmi, the ‘isht devtaa’ (ancestral goddess) of the Malla royal family, still held in the highest regard as the earliest patrons of the city. She has multiple forms and names and is revered among the Newari Hindus who constitute the ethnic majority in Bhaktapur.

She holds one of the topmost positions in the hierarchy of tantric divinity. Because of her fearsome power, her primary visage is kept secret from the public, visible only to the Karmacharya priests who worship her. Multiple representations of her are visible across the ornamentation and carvings on the temple itself. She is regarded as the bestower of success and protection.

The temple of Siddhilakshmi is shrouded from public view while repairs are ongoing in the interiors of the Nyatapola temple.

We are not allowed to go in the Siddhilakshmi temple. Earlier when my father was the appointed priest, he would go there. There is a special appointed priest and family who can visit and worship; everyone cannot attend. There is one day in a year during Dasain (a traditional Hindu festival), if we contact the caretakers, we can make a request to go with them.

R.Karmacharya, a local guide in her thirties
LIVES AROUND THE NYATAPOLA TEMPLE

Anchored to the Taumadhi Square on an enormous masonry plinth that has five stepped levels, the temple’s towering visage is both a spectacle itself and a place to view other spectacles from, a reciprocal relationship that the temple has had with the city since its inception. Because it occupies a prominent location in processional routes as well as trade routes within the city the Nyatapola is ensconced in the everyday theatre of Bhaktapur’s public life.

Even for its most marginalised residents, the temple is both a physical landmark used to navigate their way through the city and an icon that most clearly identifies the city. And yet, despite its scale and significance within the public realm of the city, the temple’s innermost sanctum remains inaccessible to most of the city’s residents. It is a curious juxtaposition of public and private, local and global, heritage and everyday.

There are four shrines dedicated to Hindu god Ganesha marking the four corners of the Nyatapola. Each shrine is visited daily by locals, who carry out various religious offerings and rituals. On special occasions and festivals, it is common to carry out an animal sacrifice in front of the shrine. The Ganesh shrines and even the Nyatapola temple’s massive stepped plinth walls are an inextricable part of everyday religious activity in Bhaktapur.

The space around the temple is part of the everyday rituals of worship for many of Bhaktapur’s residents. A mandala near the temple is a representation of the Nyatapola Temple and can be worshipped daily by locals in the city. Currently it remains surrounded by wooden props and scaffolding as the city rebuilds itself after the Earthquake.

For us (Muslims)- What is important? For people who come to visit here.. It is probably the Nyatapola Temple, Durbar Square, these old things they come to see..I cross the Nyatapola Temple and Taumadhi... once in the evening and once in the morning on the way to the masjid (mosque). for me Taumadhi and Nyatapola Temple are just places on the way to the masjid.

N. Mohammed, a grocer in his seventies
A popular local story about a fire that spread through Banepa in the 1960s:

Once a shopkeeper in Banepa—a town few kilometers from Bhaktapur, insulted the Navadurga Simha and Dumha guardians. The whole city caught fire. Local fire brigades were unable to reach in time, and there was widespread damage. We must always respect the guardians of the temple!

In its three centuries of existence, the temple has survived several catastrophic earthquakes more or less intact, which adds to its mythical status. The 1934 Nepal Bihar Earthquake caused some damage to its pinnacle and upper-most storey, which was repaired, and it weathered the impact of the 2015 Gorkha Earthquake as well, though it developed some structural problems in its upper storeys.

Thus, the Nyatapola has never collapsed or been reconstructed, records of past repairs include work to its upper two storeys and roofs. In a city where most buildings have undergone several iterations of destruction and renewal, the Nyatapola’s specific version of physical continuity has become a symbol of resilience and strength.

Each year, in the month of June, the busharahn—’birthday’ or day of completion of the temple is celebrated by a community of Awals (traditionally bricklayers and masons), who hoist a flag at the pinnacle of the temple.

Five pairs of mythological guardians protect the Nyatapola temple. A pair of wrestlers at the bottom, followed by elephants, lions, griffins and finally Simha and Dumha, the lion and tiger goddesses. Locals frown upon playing with these figures, though often tourists will pose with them.

CARE & PROTECTION FOR THE NYATAPOLA TEMPLE

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A popular local story about a fire that spread through Banepa in the 1960s.
In 2019, preservation work on the Nyatapola to repair the damage of the earthquake officially began. A massive framework of bamboo scaffolding was set up around the temple and work progressed smoothly for the first few months. However, by March 2020, a national lockdown effectively halted all reconstruction and repair works in Bhaktapur. Since the annual monsoons were due to arrive in June/July, the Nyatapola repair could not be delayed for too long. Thus, in April despite the national lockdown, work resumed on the temple. For several weeks, over 4000 volunteers were recruited to meet the monsoon deadline for the Nyatapola. Thousands of ‘jhingati’ (terracotta tiles) were donated by local residents from their personal stores and from older homes, sheds and personal storage.

The Nyatapola Temple’s post-disaster ‘preservation’ presents a series of apparent contradictions. The temple is both a nationally listed monument and one of the listed structures of a UNESCO World Heritage Site, but its repairs do not strictly qualify as ‘preservation’ according to westernised ideas of heritage conservation. Rather, the temple repairs are part of what is referred to as ‘cyclic renewal’, a term that describes the broad range of repair and care practices for religious and community buildings in Nepal.

Previously, they used to acknowledge King Bupatindra Malla for building Nyatapola. If you ask the same question now, we can say, it is every single one of us, who built Nyatapola; we have all added at least one handful of clay to this giant temple to help rebuild it. Now when people ask, it will be the people of Khwopa (Bhaktapur) who have built this temple, not a king.

S. Prajapati, the mayor of Bhaktapur in a public speech

Women in particular, have had restricted access to religious spaces in Bhaktapur. In volunteering to clean reclaimed bricks and help with roofing, women have been active participants in protecting their heritage.