

CULTURAL CO-OPERATION: AUSTRIANS IN NEPAL

At the peak of the glorious Malla era in the late 17th century, an Austrian became the first Westerner to cross into Nepal. The Jesuit priest Johannes Grueber, travelling in the service of the Pope, came to Kathmandu from China via Lhasa in 1660 AD, in search of a land route from Rome to China. A trained mathematician and land surveyor, Father Grueber calculated the latitude of Kathmandu, his reports placing it on the records and maps of the world. He also presented a telescope, probably the first modern technology in Nepal, to the ruler of Kathmandu, Pratap Malla.

Almost three centuries later, in the 1930s, another Austrian surveyor, Erwin Schneider, started his monumental work on the cartography of Nepal, which he continued until recently. The famous 'Schneider maps' remain unparalleled, not only for mountaineering in the Himalayas but also for visitors to the three cities of the Kathmandu Valley – Kathmandu, Patan and Bhaktapur.

From the 1960s, a succession of Austrian architects have made major contributions towards safeguarding the cultural heritage of Nepal. Carl Pruscha, for 10 years UN planning advisor to Nepal, compiled and published the first comprehensive inventory of the monuments of the Kathmandu Valley. In 1977 UNESCO sent a mission to Nepal, headed by Eduard Sekler, which drew up a conservation master plan for the valley and proposed its chief historical monuments as UNESCO World Heritage Sites. It was Sekler who convinced the Austrian government to make the first direct contribution towards preserving this heritage, with his proposal to repair the north wing of the royal palace of Patan's Darbar Square. This laid the basis for the long-term co-operative project between the Department of Archaeology of HMG of Nepal and Austria's Institute of International Cooperation (IIZ), which finally led to the establishment of the Patan Museum.

From 1986 to 1997, project co-ordinator was Götz Hagmüller, who came to Nepal in 1979 as manager of the Bhaktapur Development Project, the first and most comprehensive urban conservation programme in Nepal undertaken with German assistance. Residing in a historical *math* in Bhaktapur, Hagmüller has been involved in such assignments as preparing the Swayambunath Conservation Masterplan, and reconstructing the Cyasilin Mandap, the 'Pavilion of the Eight Corners' in Bhaktapur's Darbar Square – and the *Patan Museum*.

The former palace of kings, in its current incarnation a museum for Nepal's sacred art, the Patan Museum is an example not only of architectural precedence in the region, but also of pioneering institutional innovation. Throughout much of South Asia, public museums generally have low standards of display, information and maintenance, inadequate security provisions, and under-qualified staff. Sometimes there is not even enough money for the electricity bill or to replace a light bulb. How then can they achieve their educational aims or realise their potential as tourist attractions?

Museums are traditionally conceived as non-profit cultural and educational institutions, dependent on annual government allocations for operating costs. Entrance fees are not at the museum's disposal,

and there are scant incentives to raise other revenue because such income would simply go back to the central budget office. Maintaining and operating a museum of international standards in a country like Nepal is thus impossible unless the issue of independent sustainability is addressed. How to operate such a museum without further burdening the national budget?

The challenges for a new alternative museum in Patan lay not only in devising an institutional structure that would allow autonomy and income generation, but also in convincing HMG of Nepal of the merits of such a novel venture. With the advice of local and Austrian consultants, the Department of Archaeology agreed to an institutional framework that would allow the Patan Museum to be administered as a semi-autonomous, public corporation. This was a milestone – the first time that a cultural institution in Nepal was granted a legal basis allowing it to be run more like a private company than a government office. The restoration of the building and installation of the museum, funded largely by an Austrian gift, served as the start-up capital for this venture.

The constitution of the Patan Museum Board gives it the right and duty to operate the museum as a revenue-generating cultural institution, to guide its development plans and programmes, to employ its own staff, and decide on its pricing policy and revenue generation. Managing its own operational and maintenance expenditures, the museum can maintain high standards independently.

When it opened in 1997, the museum fixed the entrance fee at Rs 10 for local visitors, and Rs 30 for tourists from SAARC countries. For other visitors from abroad, the fee was set at Rs 120, the equivalent of two US dollars then, but, as the museum gained international recognition, has since been doubled. The sale of tourist tickets will remain the mainstay of the museum's economy, but there are other facilities to generate additional revenues and also provide the client services vital to any international-standard museum. These include:

- ? The Patan Museum Café in the newly landscaped palace gardens, which has become one of Kathmandu Valley's most attractive outdoor restaurants.
- ? The Patan Museum Gift Shop, with Himalaya-relevant art and other books, as well as posters, postcards and other publications exclusive to the museum. From its own accumulated revenues, the museum has invested one million rupees. (c. 14,500 Euro) in the recent publication of a high-standard Museum Guide Book – a revolving and sustainable source of further income.
- ? The Guest Studio with an open terrace on the top floor overlooking the gardens, an exclusive palace residence suite in the heart of Patan.
- ? One gallery and open arcades for temporary exhibitions, another gallery overlooking Durbar Square for lectures or seminars, and the main courtyard for cultural performances.

The Patan Museum has had around 40,000 visitors a year since 1997, on average 100 per day. About half of these are foreign tourists. Such numbers may seem small in comparison to museums overseas, but Patan Museum's 20,000 annual visitors from abroad constitute 5% of all tourist arrivals (in a country of 23 million) – a claim that no other museum in the world can make. Thanks

to the praise of major travel guidebooks as well as coverage in local and international publications, the number of visitors and the accompanying income may well guarantee a self-reliant future for the Patan Museum – also a milestone in Austria’s efforts to develop new sustainable institutions in co-operation with its bilateral partners.

– *Götz Hagmüller, architect*