

June 2017

## Staging Memories at the Narayanhiti Palace Museum, Kathmandu

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### Recommended Citation

Whitmarsh, Bryony R.. 2017. Staging Memories at the Narayanhiti Palace Museum, Kathmandu.

*HIMALAYA* 37(1).

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol37/iss1/13>



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### Acknowledgements

Endless thanks are due for the patience of the author's supervisor, Michael Hutt. She is grateful to both Lekh Bahadur Karki and Rohit Dunghana as Directors of the Palace Museum for the opportunity to work with their staff during field visits in 2013, 2014 and 2015; to Rukmani Gurung for her hours of patience while interviewing her and her colleagues about their work at the museum; to Ashesh Rajbansh, Editor of SPACES Magazine for the use of his excellent quality images to illustrate this article; and to Radhika Thapa, Rina Chaudhary, Janak Hamal, and Kabi Koirala who assisted with the author's research in July 2014. The author is also grateful to Kunal Tejbir Lama, her unofficial research mentor, and to the authors and special issue editors of this volume, Heather Hindman and Andrew Nelson, for coordinating the panel in 2014 and nurturing this paper into existence.

# Staging Memories at the Narayanhiti Palace Museum, Kathmandu

Bryony Whitmarsh

This article focuses on a particular time (present-day Nepal, post-monarchy) and site (the Narayanhiti Palace Museum) that offers a compelling space for understanding the negotiation of the country's recent past, revealing much about the transition from royal to republican Nepal. Acknowledging that the social and historical location of the museum causes it to bear the imprint of social relations beyond its walls, this article asks: How is Nepal's royal past now understood, and who authorizes the understanding? There is no king governing Narayanhiti Palace, and the state does not use the palace to conduct its affairs; the politics of the space therefore risk being concealed by its open gates. This article explores the re-creation of a stable imagined past, in contrast with both the urban chaos of contemporary Kathmandu and with the political instability of Republican Nepal's capital.

Based on ethnographic research 'behind the scenes' at the museum, I take Annis' analogy

of the museum as 'staging ground' (1986) and explore the museum as both a space where decisions are made about what stories are told (sanctifying some forms of remembering and endorsing forgetting), as well as a space experienced by both ex-palace staff and visitors. These people bring the past to mind, combining their imaginations and memories with the environment of the museum. I suggest that official representations try to secure an image of a unified national identity that simultaneously remembers and forgets the king (Lakier 2009; Hutt 2006). As the city and the nation continue to reinvent themselves, the carefully constructed 'non-place' of the unchanging Palace Museum is being revealed.

**Keywords:** museum, palace, monarchy, Nepal, politics, memory.

## Introduction

Nepal, a low-income nation-state with a highly diverse population of 28 million (according to the 2010 national census), has undergone rapid political change since the abolition of the monarchy-led Panchayat system in 1990. The past 26 years have seen a multi-party democracy, ten years of civil war, the redefinition of the state as a secular republic, and a prolonged transition to a new constitutional order. This article focuses on one aspect of that transition: the consigning of the Shah monarchy to the past, with a particular emphasis on the fate of its principal palace in the capital city of Kathmandu.

On February 26, 2009, the Gaurishankar doors swung open to admit ordinary citizens into the Shah monarchy's Narayanhiti Palace in Kathmandu, marking its transformation from a royal residence to a Palace Museum. Its opening was announced on May 28, 2008, following the end of a ten-year internal conflict (*jan yuddha* or 'People's War') between the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) (CPN-M) and the democratically elected government. Nepal was declared a Federal Republic, ending the 239-year-old monarchy. I argue that the opening of the Palace Museum does more than mark the transition of Nepal from a monarchy to a republic; it creates and curates public narratives in the city through a re-articulation of the past. French scholar Michel De Certeau tells us how the imposition of proper names imposes a history on a place (1990: 159). This article explores how the act of re-naming the palace as a museum transformed it into a timeless non-place, by disengaging it from the monarchy and creating a dissociated monarchical past, designed to be passed through rather than appropriated (Auge 1995). The re-creation of a stable imagined past, preserved in an atmosphere of cultivated neglect behind its walls, stands in stark contrast with the political instability of the capital in Republican Nepal.<sup>1</sup>

This article addresses initial questions arising from my doctoral research, which focuses on the changing meaning of the space of the palace through an examination of the relationships between political transformations, the processes under which the Palace Museum has been inhabited, and the spatial transitions it has undergone. The building was completed in 1970 during the reign of King Mahendra Bir Bikram Shah (1955-1972). Whereas it was once accessible only to selected members of the public on the annual national Hindu festival of Dasain,<sup>2</sup> it can now be entered for the price of an admission ticket.<sup>3</sup> On February 26, 2009, the Prime Minister of the Federal Republic of Nepal, Pushpa Kamal Dahal, the former leader of Nepal's ten-year CPN-M led insurgency (1996-2006), inaugurated the Palace Museum as a symbol of the Nepali citizens

fight against feudalism and the "beginning of victory," (Nepalnews.com 2009) staking a claim for a re-evaluation of the site as a symbol for the struggle of 'the people.' In the same speech, Dahal declared an official investigation into the murder of King Birendra Bir Bikram Shah (1945-2001) and his immediate family within the palace on June 1, 2001, declaring that this would "bring the facts to light," and offering a new and open future. The palace is now also the site for the *Ganatantra Smarak* (republic memorial), under construction as of this writing, which will claim to represent the unity of the nation. Thus it is clear that the palace presents an opportunity to investigate the construction of a past that is both distant and immediate. I explore whether there is a paradox embodied in the Palace Museum. It represents the need to sever the royal past from the republican present, yet also to maintain a sense of connection with the culture from which the nation's identity has been derived. What ambiguities and contradictions emerge from the remembering of Nepal's royal past in the artificial, curated spaces of the museum?

The conversion of the palace to a museum serves the state. It offers a theatrical backdrop for scripting the past and asserting state hegemony. Walls separate the palace complex from the crowds and chaos of the city and lend it an aura of mystery, suspense and to some, obsolescence. No king rules from Narayanhiti Palace, nor does the state use the palace to conduct its affairs. The politics of the space therefore risk being concealed by its open gates. Being 'of the past,' museums are perceived to be separate from everyday life, but in naturalizing relations between the state and a narrative of Nepal's royal past, the Palace Museum is sited firmly within today's world (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2006: 39) and is being invested with new meaning. As a space where current political dramas are being played out, I argue that it is worth using this museum as a space to think through Nepal's ongoing transition from monarchy to democratic parliament (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1992: 37).

By July 2014, the Narayanhiti Palace Museum had received 1,513,088 visits by Nepalis, each searching for their own meanings in the nineteen rooms open for public view.<sup>4</sup> How do visitors to the museum imagine the monarchy? What role does the palace museum—in the trust of the state—play in generating these imaginings of Nepal's royal past?

## Understanding the Layers of Meaning of the Narayanhiti Palace Museum

This article applies my fieldwork at the Museum undertaken in 2013, 2014, and 2015 to literature within the field of

museum studies, a burgeoning interdisciplinary area that has increased in popularity since the 1980s. In addition to research conducted on the history, character, and function of museums in general, numerous studies have been dedicated to particular institutions and their collecting and exhibition practices. My starting point has been the work devoted to demonstrating that museums are a domain of cultural practice (Bennett 1995; Canclini 1995; Kwint 1999; Malraux 1978); that treats them as physical spaces that visitors and staff quite literally enter and move within (Annis 1986; Bouquet 2005; Duncan 1995), and that explores their role in constructing social realities (Handler and Gable 2003; Harris 2012; Kaplan 1994). I use Auge's notion of a 'non-place' (1995) as a metaphor for the way in which the space of the museum is used to disengage Nepal from a national identity bound to the monarchy, placing it out of reach.

Whilst the museum as an institution has its origins in western democratic societies, there has been a growing recognition that museums all over the world are not the same. The work of Professor Simon Knell reminds us of the importance of understanding the social, cultural and political contexts within which each museum operates (2010: 5).<sup>5</sup> To this end, I have interviewed those involved in establishing the museum, accompanied visitors on their visits, and spent time with staff behind the scenes.

In 1998, in her seminal work that explored the role of exhibitions in the production of heritage, anthropologist Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett set out a series of registers of meaning that highlight both the agencies of display and the multiple meanings museums hold for different groups of people (1998: 138). In order to reveal the processual and multiple layers of meaning of the Palace Museum within this paper, I take five of Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's registers of meaning as tools with which to structure my analysis. This approach, rather than being comprehensive, is intended to highlight a series of spatial concerns that are central to the re-making of the palace's meaning in the context of post-2006 Kathmandu. The first, the museum as "a vault, in the tradition of the royal treasure room, the *Schatzkammer*" (1998: 138) analyzes the state narrative as told in official speeches and the English-speaking Nepali press in the run-up to the opening of the museum (May 2008 - February 2009). The second, the museum as "a laboratory for the creation of new knowledge," (1998: 138) examines the processes of constructing collective memories in the space of the Palace Museum displays, raising questions of authenticity. The third register of meaning, the museum as "a cultural center for the keeping and transmission of patrimony," (1998: 138) draws upon

an ethnographic study 'behind the scenes' at the museum. The fourth, the museum as "a theatre, a memory place, a stage for the enactment of other times and places" (1998: 139) focuses on the visitors' experience of the displays and addresses the way in which the mise-en-scene encourages curiosity and enables nostalgia. Finally, the fifth register of meaning, a museum as "a place to mourn" (1998: 139) discusses the deathly associations of the Palace Museum as the site of the 2001 Royal Massacre.

### The Narayanhiti Palace

In order to understand the transformation of the royal palace to a Palace Museum, one must first locate the roots of that transition by looking at the relationship between the role of the royal palace, the reign of the monarchy in Nepal and the construction of a national identity. The Shah kings came to the throne of the hill kingdom of Gorkha in the mid-sixteenth century, and are usually credited with the creation of the modern nation state of Nepal, following a series of conquests by King Prithvi Narayan Shah (1723-1775) of most of the kingdoms in central and Eastern Nepal (1743-1775). Here I contextualize the Narayanhiti Palace within the history of the Shah monarchy in Nepal.

The Gorkha Palace (the original palace of the Shah dynasty) was at the center of the king's *desa* (realm); it acted as a mountain shrine to the Shah dynasty that made clear its divine right to rule.<sup>6</sup> The Hanuman Dhoka Palace was at the center of the Malla kingdom of Kathmandu, appropriated by King Prithvi Narayan Shah in September 1768 after he took control of the city. He was re-crowned at this palace, positioning the Shah monarchy as the rightful Hindu kings, at the center of what was now a vastly expanded kingdom. The Hanuman Dhoka Palace represented the king's *muluk* (territorial domain) and remained the site of the king's coronation until the last Shah king was crowned in 2001.<sup>7</sup>

After King Prithvi Narayan Shah's death in 1775, Nepal was ruled by a series of child kings and their regents, giving those appointed to the premiership the opportunity to appropriate some of the duties and privileges of the king. In 1846, Army General Jang Bahadur Kunwar Rana (1817-1877) staged a coup and made the office of prime minister hereditary, leading his family to become the de facto rulers until 1951. The Shah kings were reduced to playing the role of figureheads. The Rana family built 41 palace buildings that shifted the center of control outside of the ritually defined borders of the town. These buildings used neoclassical architectural forms and scale as modes of visual distinction (Liechty 2010: 114).<sup>8</sup> The palace at Narayanhiti was built for Jang Bahadur Kunwar's fourth

brother, Ranodipp Singh (1825–1885) in 1847. Its name is made up of two words ‘*narayan*’ (a name of the Hindu god Vishnu, whose temple is located to the south east of the main palace building and of whom the Shah kings presented themselves as an embodiment), and the Newari ‘*hiti*’ (meaning ‘water spout,’ located opposite the Narayan temple). The palace became the official center of control after Ranodipp Singh assumed the position of Prime Minister in 1877. King Prithvi Bir Bikram Shah (1875–1911) was moved to this palace in the 1880s, deliberately disassociating him from the palaces at the center of his *muluk* and *desa*.<sup>9</sup> This was not somewhere that the king chose to be. The move relocated the activities of the monarchy from the symbolic ritual center of the city to behind the walls of a bounded compound. Throughout the century of Rana rule, the space of the Narayanhiti Palace was used for domestic and official functions only—though the presence of the king as a representation of the kingdom conveyed ritual significance to the space (Leuchtag 1958).

The end of Rana rule in 1951 was precipitated when King Tribhuvan Bir Bikram Shah (1906–1955), drove from the Narayanhiti Palace to the Indian Embassy on November 6, 1950, then left the country, effectively stripping the Ranas of their right to rule on his behalf. After an Indian-brokered deal, the palace became the active seat of governance when King Tribhuvan returned from India on February 18, 1951, to lead a coalition government. After King Mahendra (1920–1972) assumed the throne in 1955, he soon demolished much of the first Narayanhiti Palace to make way for a new palace built (1961–1971) as a “tangible rallying point” for the Nepali nation (Polk 1985: 94).<sup>10</sup> Construction of the new palace involved the demolition of several other Rana palaces in order to create the straight avenue called Durbar Marg (notably referred to by many Nepalis as ‘King’s Way’ when speaking in English). The new palace consciously used Nepali forms and in its rejection of European neoclassicism, created a clear visual distinction between the Shah and Rana dynasties. Designed by American architect Benjamin Polk (1916–2001) and British interior designer Algernon Asprey (1912–1991), and executed by Nepali engineer Shanker Nath Rimal, the palace was to represent the Nepali nation as created by the king.<sup>11</sup> In 1962, King Mahendra ‘gifted’ a new constitution to the nation (Burghart 1994: 13) which established the party-less system of Panchayat democracy. This provided a limited amount of electoral accountability, and placed the king at the apex of the political order (Gupta 1993: 261). In order to legitimize his position, King Mahendra reinvented the monarchy as “the definer of nationalism, the protector of Nepal’s sovereignty and the bringer of development” (Mocko 2012: 88). The design of the palace embodied his

appeal (both locally and internationally) to both tradition and modernity (Malagodi 2015), with a modern interior cloaked by traditional elements on the exterior. As the site of state activities, the official home of the monarchy until 2008, and the location of the military secretariat from 1951 (Koirala 1995: 39–42), the palace was the most important center of political power which framed, literally and metaphorically, the formation of the king’s contemporary relationships as the head of state.

As the symbolic center of the state, anti-government protests took place directly in front of the palace gates in 1990 and again in 2006. These events are now widely understood as “make or break demonstrations for democracy” and feature heavily in the public consciousness today (Thapa 2011: 212). Following the murder of King Birendra and his family on June 1, 2001, the palace became associated with a collective exclusion from the truth, manifested by the media censorship that followed (Hutt 2006; Lakier 2009). This revealed codes of deference and secrecy put in place by the Monarchy, thereby exemplifying the complicity of the palace’s space with social order—specifically the role of the monarch. Pushpa Kamal Dahal’s inauguration speech as Prime Minister drew upon the symbolism of the closed palace and staked a claim for the re-evaluation of the site as a symbol for the struggle of ‘the people.’ The appropriation in 2009 of what had been royal space was deliberately designed to position the *janata* (people) at the head of the nation and shift the order of power. I argue that the transformation of the palace into a museum, a space that is seemingly ‘open,’ amplifies its “complicitous silence” (Bourdieu 1977: 188).

### The Official Route

This brief overview of the official route through the Palace Museum is intended to simultaneously orient the reader and to identify key tactics that work to create a temporary, shared identity amongst visitors, who are expected to keep in line and go where they are told: a defining factor of a non-place (Auge 1995: 101–103).<sup>12</sup>

The entrance to the museum is through the southern gate to the palace compound, at the north end of Durbar Marg (see Figure 1). The route starts in the Kaski Baithak, the main state reception room on the first floor and immediately diverts from the central state wing, ensuring that visitors cannot imitate the King’s official route through the building. Instead, visitors pass through parts of the guest wing (western wing), before visiting the throne room (central wing) and a few rooms within the private wing (eastern wing), before exiting the building



Figure 1. Exterior view of the main entrance to the Narayanhiti Palace Museum showing the marble staircase leading up to the Kaski Baithak.

(Rajbansh, 2009)



Figure 2. View of the Dailekh reception room showing the visitors' route demarcated with barriers.

(Rajbansh, 2009)

where the route becomes less defined.<sup>13</sup> Attendants in each room rarely converse with visitors other than when it is necessary to actively keep them on the route, which is physically defined through the building with the use of rope barriers that prevent the full inhabitation of the rooms (see Figure 2). Visitors are supposed to engage with one single text panel in both Nepali and English, which offers a brief description of one particular ceremonial use of the space.

Outside the building, the museum attendants are replaced by armed soldiers, stationed around the perimeter of the building. Passing around the side of the palace, the route continues past the remains of a two-story building labelled as the remains of “Tribhuvan Sadhan, the site of the royal palace massacre...” and into the garden.<sup>14</sup>

### The Palace Museum Opened as a National Legacy

To what extent is the museum “a vault, in the tradition of a royal treasure room” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998: 138)? Is there a connection between the museum and the political process of democratization in post-2006 Nepal?

“Ordinary” Nepalis were encouraged by official speeches to consider the site their own. For example, when the national flag was raised at the Palace on June 15, 2008, four days after the last Shah King, Gyanendra, had left, Prime Minister and Acting Head of State, Girija Prasad Koirala (Nepali Congress) (1925-2010) stated in his speech: “Ordinary hands have hoisted the flags. The flags belong to the people. These flags will not bow. We Nepali people will not surrender to others” (Nepalnews.com 2008).

At this Palace, Nepali democracy was granted on one hand (during the *andolan* in 1990 and 2006) but just as easily taken away at others (during states of emergency in

1962, 2002, and 2005). One Nepali public intellectual, Abhi Subedi, argues that at the root of the decision to convert the palace into a museum lays the desire to reverse the order of power (2009: 4). Once in public hands, the palace was made available for the collective identity of the citizenry as a symbol of national unity. Koirala's speech stated that the palace and its contents now belonged to "the people of Nepal," presenting "the people" as a unified population in the face of increasing demands for identity-based federalism and anxiety over the survival of the state apparatus. Koirala's speech recognized the potency of the museum in forging a national self-consciousness (Kaplan 1994: 1). Hence, the palace opening as a museum is a particular instance of the reconstruction of a Nepali national identity, no longer dependent upon a Hindu monarch. The transformation of the palace into a museum was intended to create an imagined community by emphasizing the opening up of a space that was previously closed, while at the same time consigning the monarchy to the past. Newspaper reports from the time of the transition suggest an affinity with this way of 'imagining' national unity, and are echoed by visitors' contemporary responses in the Palace Museum's visitor books, where people regularly call for more rooms to be opened and more items to be on display.

The association between 'openness' and post-2006 constructions of national unity can be understood in the context of the aftermath of the royal massacre in June 2001. Nepalese historian Yogesh Raj described the personal significance of the publication of an aerial image of the Narayanhiti Palace in the media following the massacre.<sup>15</sup> For him, this press coverage provided his first glimpse into a previously inaccessible world. The only official statement surrounding the events of the night of June 1, 2001 is the 196-page report produced by the Chief Justice and the Speaker of the Nepali Parliament, shortly after the event.<sup>16</sup> The lack of official information released to the public and the widespread disbelief in the veracity of this report was used by politicians to contrive a sense of unity based on exclusion from the truth (Lakier 2009). Political rhetoric surrounding the museum when it opened eight years later directly link the massacre and the opening of the Palace Museum. Pushpa Kamal Dahal, then Prime Minister and leader of the CPN—Maoist party, stated in his opening speech on February 26, 2009:

This is one incident that every Nepali individual has the right to know the truth of... Being the first prime minister of federal democratic republic of Nepal, I pledge to all of you that the royal massa-

cre will be investigated again and the clear picture of the incident will be brought to the public. (*The Kathmandu Post* 2009a)

The Tribhuvan Sadan premises, the site of the massacre, were demolished under King Gyanendra's orders in 2005. In preparation for the opening of the Palace Museum, the foundations were excavated and raised to reveal the ground plan of the building. A large display board was erected, including a plan drawing of the building, with four numbered points marked. These give the locations at which the bodies of various members of the royal family were discovered. This is followed by a series of labels that claim to mark the exact spot that each person was killed or injured, e.g. "4: Dry pond where seriously-wounded Crown Prince Dipendra was found in a critical condition." In July 2009, Prime Minister Madhav Kumar Nepal (CPN United Marxist Leninist) declared his intentions to rebuild Tribhuvan Sadan, a project which was in progress in 2015. The Palace Museum, as the site of the massacre, forms a locus for the repeated political need to hark back to the unity contrived in 2001. It offers an imagined stability in the face of urban and political instability, evidenced within the other articles in this issue.

The emphasis on openness made it imperative that the property of the royal family, in particular the symbols of the King's office (including the palace), were transferred into public hands as a national legacy, secured and consigned to the past. When the Constituent Assembly announced the transformation of the palace into a museum, they tasked the government with ensuring the safety of all property inside the palace (*The Kathmandu Post* 2008a). The Property Evaluation Committee led by Dr. Govinda Kusum was formed to create an inventory (*The Kathmandu Post* 2008a), and newspaper reports regularly cast aspersions over the king's level of co-operation with this process, speculating on the contents of the palace.<sup>17</sup> King Gyanendra handed over the crown and scepter on the day that he stood down, and reports state that the committee had the authenticity of the crown verified by an expert (*The Kathmandu Post* 2008b). The director of the museum from 2011 until 2014, Lekh Bahadur Karki, explained that the committee promptly consigned the crown and scepter to a room in the palace where they remain guarded by museum staff during the day and by a serving army soldier at night.

Negotiations have taken place over the display of the crown jewels at the museum, and they reveal the disputed status of the monarchy during the period of political transition. The museum staff publicly expressed their intention to display the crown jewels in 2009 (*The Kathmandu Post*

2009b) and by July 2014 had constructed a bullet-proof display case within the Kailali room on the ground floor of the palace for this purpose. To enter the room, visitors would have to pass through three detection systems and Lekh Bahadur Karki confirmed that “its [the crown’s] security and safety is our prime concern.” The display has been delayed because of objections, presented as security concerns raised by the Nepal Army, and at the time of visiting in July 2015, negotiations were still taking place between the museum and the army.<sup>18</sup> The army’s institutional loyalty to the monarchy is well documented (Adhikari 2015) and it is the feeling of Rohit Dhungana, director of the museum in 2015, that the army will never agree to the public display of the crown jewels until it is convinced that the king will never return to office. The same symbolic power that motivates some museum staff to offer visitors the opportunity to gain proximity to the monarchy, by the display of the crown jewels, is reflected in the army’s actions that aim to prevent their full transfer into public ownership. These negotiations draw into focus that the remembering, suggested by concern over ‘preserving’ the contents of the palace, in fact serves as a prelude to forgetting and eventually erasure.<sup>19</sup>

### The Creation of an Idyllic Royal Memory

Contestation over the meaning of monarchy in today’s Nepal speaks to the creation of an idyllic royal memory at the Palace Museum, as a deliberate attempt to create a past dissociated from the present. In this use of the second of Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s registers of meaning, the museum as a “laboratory for the creation of new knowledge” (1998: 138) I stretch her definition of knowledge to specifically include history and memory. Memory is described by Susan Crane as “thinking things in their absence,” therefore activated by present concerns, taking a bodily form in the brain. Memory is invisible, becoming visible through imaginative recollection; it is active, unreliable and subject to revision (Crane 2000: 1). Memory functions at an individual and group level, with one event having different meanings for different individuals. The processes of constructing collective memories at the Palace Museum reflects power structures within society. For example, who authorizes and who contests these understandings and how the past is used?

Nepal’s recent transition from Hindu monarchy to secular republic has created a moment within which new historical narratives are being created. The spatial organization of the Museum as well as its interpretation stages the diplomatic and ceremonial functions of the office of the king. Even during the period of renewed multi-party democracy of the 1990s, King Birendra was heavily involved in the

political process, and the palace was the center of the state. However, the lack of evidence in the museum that they/he did any governing pushes the political role of the king out of focus.

The first labelled item a visitor sees outside the main palace entrance, is a table labelled: “The desk, used by H.M. The King to offer *tika* to the public on the occasion of Dashain [*sic*].”<sup>20</sup> *Tika* is a smudge of powder or paste on the forehead given, in this case, as a blessing from the king, particularly during the reign of King Birendra. By calling to mind this act, the museum positions the king as the ‘father’ of the nation (by giving *tika* not just to his blood relatives, but also to his citizens).<sup>21</sup> In the Dhanusha Room (the last room on the tour), the room label reminds visitors that this is where the king would offer *tika* to high ranking officials on Vijaya Dashami, the 10<sup>th</sup> day of the national holiday Dasain, as well as confer medals on other occasions. Display cases set into four columns in this room show a range of medals, labelled as examples of orders established by the king.<sup>22</sup> Visitors are asked to recall images of people (citizens, officers, military personnel) beholding the king in his ceremonial roles. They become complicit in upholding the image of a ‘gift-giving’ monarch. Genevieve Lakier suggests that King Birendra’s absence from public life and apparent absence from politics allowed his image to be resurrected in a generous way after his death (2009: 226). At the Palace Museum, “history continues to rework and transform [memory] in its attempts to subject experience of the intimately lived [royal] past to contemporary rationalizing narratives harnessed to the interests of an emergent, democratic, mass future” (Shelton 2006: 486). This selective memorialization of the king as sacred gift-giver and benevolent father neutralizes the political role of kingship and preserves the monarchy as distant and distinct from the present.<sup>23</sup>

Writing about the aftermath of the murders at Narayanhiti, Lakier identifies the importance to the state of the construction of a collective memory that simultaneously remembers and forgets the king (2009: 229). This paradox is materialized in the museum, which cultivates a memory of King Birendra, with little reference to King Gyanendra. There are few references, either material or textual, to King Gyanendra, or to any events after the date of the massacre in June 2001. Memorialization in museums is always selective and necessarily accompanied by amnesia (Shelton 2006: 489). As king, Gyanendra surely left an imprint on the palace, but his traces are left unmentioned, as conspicuous silences. There is a question about the level of official consciousness of this amnesia, and of course there are pragmatic reasons to consider, as he was the only king to leave the palace alive and with the opportunity therefore to take

items away with him. Yet by virtue of the largely unchanging displays, the narrative that focuses on the office of the king and omits evidence of King Gyanendra's direct and unpopular rule has been normalized.

### Attempts to Reconnect the Palace with the Monarchy

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett identifies the agency of display, asking "what does it mean to show?" (1998: 2). The Palace Museum is mainly run by ex-palace employees who were transferred to the general administration ministry's reserve pool after King Gyanendra was displaced.<sup>24</sup> I use the museum employees to demonstrate the third register of meaning, the museum as a "cultural center for the keeping and transmission of patrimony" (1998: 138) as they see themselves as the guardians of a particular patrimony: the palace as they experienced it. They also make daily decisions about both what and how to show the palace to visitors—decisions that continue to insist the history of the palace is heard.

This quotation taken from a newspaper report from the day the palace opened as a museum echoes feelings expressed to me by current museum staff: "Once they were employees of the powerful royal palace. But with the monarchy gone, the grandeur associated with a job in the palace has vanished. What now stands around them is just a pink palace sans royalties" (*The Kathmandu Post* 2009b). These staff still refer to their place of work as 'the palace,' creating ambiguity through the collapse of any distinction between palace and museum. The organizational structure, particularly of the exhibition team, is still organized along palace lines. Employees have spoken to me of their pride in their previous role, their feeling of loss, and the differences between their previous role in the palace and their new role in the museum (e.g. from supervision of a store of sanitary ware to tour guide, or from secretary to head of the photographic section). For them, the re-naming of palace to museum has trapped them within the official story being told, and put them in a vulnerable position. They feel a disparity between the respect with which they were held as a member of palace staff (positions that had often been passed down in families for generations) and the lack of value now placed on their individual experience. Though transferred into the civil service in 2008, these employees were treated as a separate group and were only able to serve in temporary positions until 2015.<sup>25</sup> I explore a number of interesting continuities in my thesis. For example, the majority of the museum staff visit Gyanendra Shah's residence Nirmal Niwas on the occasion of his birthday each July, and some members of staff still offer their professional services to the ex-royal family.

In order to reverse what the staff describe as deterioration and erosion, which Auge would define as the non-place gouged out of the palace through the removal of its previous identity and history (1995: 85), the patrimony that these employees would like to transmit is one of the palace as they experienced it, the 'truth' as passed down to them. Their proposal presented in a written masterplan, prepared in 2012, was to open more rooms in the main palace building, as well as other buildings in the complex, in order to reveal the palace as a functioning institution. This included the old secretariat building (now the passport office), King Birendra's residence Sri Sadan (1966), King Mahendra's garages, and the collection of animal skins confiscated under hunting laws.<sup>26</sup> In addition to stating the function of each room, the planned labels for the rooms carefully use the prefix 'sv' (short for the Nepali *svargavasi*, translated as 'late') e.g. 'Late King Birendra's Dressing Room' or 'Bedroom used by Late Princess Shruti'. I was informed by Lekh Bahadur Karki, when he was the director of the museum, that when politicians were taken to visit Sri Sadhan, they expressed feelings of sadness and loss. This was interpreted by Lekh Bahadur Karki as the ability of the space of Sri Sadan, a building designed by Birendra when he was the Crown Prince, to change people's opinion of the monarchy, and he posited that this might explain why it remains closed. Through my visits to Sri Sadan, I can confirm that the rooms and artefacts are not those of the pomp and ceremony of official engagements. Instead, personal items like a bottle of Oil of Olay cream and a chest expander in the bathroom, and a homework schedule on the wall, encourage you to reflect on a family who did ordinary things together and held values that a visitor can relate to, e.g. proudly displaying your daughter's artwork or providing your children with a schedule to ensure that they complete their homework. The rooms are musty, and the furniture is covered by a film of dust, together infusing the building with an air of another, expired time. If a non-place is a place practiced without in-depth relations (Auge 1995: 77-78), this master plan can be read as an attempt to re-connect the place of the palace with the institution of the monarchy.

The museum is bureaucratically positioned at ministry level, and as such sits separately from other government-run museums, positioned under the Department of Archaeology.<sup>27</sup> It is the only ex-royal building to sit outside of the institution of the Nepal Trust, set up to account for and manage all ex-royal property. As such, its position could be seen to be indicative of political interest in the project. This position also enables a certain level of inertia, as decisions have to travel up several layers of bureaucracy before being made. The museum employees that I spoke

to, feel as though they had little choice about what was shown or the ways in which the palace was interpreted. However, the employees do still exert their own agency, and my time spent with the museum staff highlights the complexity of what does (and what does not) go on display. Three training days were organized by the Ministry of Culture in February 2009, just before the museum opened, in which people with museum training and experience, and knowledge of art history were invited to present what they felt were the 'correct' ways to interpret and conserve the space of the palace. The original intention was for all visitors to be guided through the palace on a guided tour. On one walk-through, as part of the training, Mandakini Shrestha, Director of the National Museum in Chauni, is said to have suggested that museum staff put up a sign in the Dhading room where there had been a television, in order to show that this was taken away from the palace by King Gyanendra. In 2012, the most striking 'new' object for me was a large television set in this spot. Visitors are often fascinated by it and pose questions about the 'ordinary' life of the ex-royal family—what television programs did they watch? In 2013, I inquired about this change to the head of this section, Budhi Bahadur Gurung, who informed me that it was added to this room by the museum staff in response to visitors' desire to relate to royal life in the palace. In 2013, the television was labelled with an A4 yellow label, giving the name of the manufacturer and its model number.

When I visited the museum in 2013, the chair used by King Gyanendra for his last press conference had been moved into the main reception hall and labelled with a laminated piece of A4 paper: "The 'chair' Ex-King Gyanendra used in the Press Conference June, 2008." This notice reminds visitors of the end of the monarchy, and particularly of King Gyanendra's departure from the palace. One might assume that this relates to the dominant narrative of victory over monarchy, and in particular over this monarch who imposed autocratic rule. However, my discussions with the staff who placed the chair here reveal that they see his final act as the king as gracious. Therefore, they intend to present King Gyanendra as the king who 'gifted' the nation to 'the people' and draw attention to his continued presence in the country, directly contradicting the official narrative that seeks to forget King Gyanendra.

For the palace staff, authenticity meant revealing the life of the palace as a working institution, the 'truth' as they knew it. In contrast, for the civil servants with museum experience involved in managing the transition of the palace to a museum, authenticity was "a question of creating and maintaining the right appearance" (Handler and Gable

1997: 45). As long as the objects had been inventoried during the transition, they were at liberty to be used in the re-creation of rooms, to present an illusion made real by the presence of palace staff working as museum employees (even if in very different roles).

### **Nostalgia at the Palace Museum**

As a non-place where history has been turned into an element of spectacle (Auge 1995: 103) the Palace Museum stages the royal past in romantic terms like a storybook, rather than being based in historical accuracy. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's fourth register of meaning, the museum as "a theatre, a memory place, a stage for the enactment of other times and places" (1998: 139) acknowledges the agency of those involved in the creation of this illusion, as well as the experience of visitors. Knell suggests that, as in the theatre where we might imagine and believe, "in the museum our imagining can be so much more believable because we are led to think that all around us has arrived objectively and all is as it seems to be" (2010: 4). The Palace Museum enables nostalgia, defined by Susan Stewart as a form of sadness without an object, something that exists as a narrative that attaches itself to an impossibly pure belief (1999). In this case, the nostalgia reflects the uncertainty of the political present through continued interest in King Birendra, following his death. It is possible to see how this plays out within the theatrical space of the Palace Museum by focusing on one of the last two rooms on the route, the Dhankuta Room (the royal bedroom). The responses of visitors observed in this space appear to demonstrate a 'voyeuristic' interest in the daily life of the royal family, an interest that museum staff take time to cultivate.

The room label reads "the bedroom used by the former king and queen." A series of family photographs of ski and climbing holidays, a vase of flowers, and a telephone are displayed on either side of the bed. It appears that there is one framed photograph of King Gyanendra and his wife, while the other photographs are all of King Birendra and Queen Aishwarya. Above the bed is a painting annotated with a poem by Queen Aishwarya. In fact, neither King Mahendra nor King Birendra and their respective Queens slept in the palace full-time<sup>28</sup> and the placement of personal objects here suggests a value placed on preserving attitudes.<sup>29</sup> Nepali visitors comment on the modest size of the bed and 'simple' nature of the interior decoration. Through this intimate encounter with the 'royal bed,' visitors are encouraged to re-member a modest and patriotic king, an imagined past that can be used in the present. The Palace Museum claims to be in

the business of actuality, but visitors enter the 'real' palace only to experience 'virtual' displays that evoke a sort of timelessness (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998: 168) in contrast to the chaotic and ever-changing urban and political environment outside of the palace walls.

### Destabilization of the Official Narrative

It might seem fairly straightforward that as an act of victory during the declaration of a new democratic era, the palace would be re-opened as a museum in order to consign the royal past to oblivion (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998: 131-176). After all, the Topkapi Palace in Istanbul was 'musealized' on the official date of the defeat of the Ottoman Empire, providing a concrete separation with the past of the old regime. What makes the Narayanhiti Palace Museum different are its deathly associations: the fact that it was the site of the royal massacre on June 1, 2001, and the importance of this event in the nation's recent history. This brings me onto the final register of meaning from Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, the museum as "a place to mourn" (1998: 139). As discussed above, official articulations of the museum when it opened seemingly invited 'the people' of Nepal to discuss what happened there.

My guide in 2012 explained that the museum staff had quickly decided to end their accompaniment of tours as the visitors exited the ground floor of the main palace building. Outside of the building, the museum attendants are replaced by armed soldiers, stationed around the building's perimeter. She explained that they found it difficult to manage questions from Nepali visitors, who felt that the staff were withholding information about the massacre. It is interesting to note that the interpretation of this area makes the bullets themselves the object of the sentence. For example, the sentence "the spot in which the bullet was fired on Queen Aishwarya," does not mention who fired the bullet.

The following comments from visitors in the museum's visitors' books serve to destabilize the official narrative of openness, intended to unite, as they question whom and what they can trust.

"I think Bullet's marks are keeping for show, it is not real" (Shiva Paudel from Kalanki, 2012).

"It's glad to observe the palace but the royal massacre is not well revealed in the palace" (Sumitra Rimal, Sanu Ram Pandey 2013 trans. Radhika Thapa, 2014).

Visitors are left to produce their own narratives, and there is clearly a difference between the political attempt to secure an image of a unified national identity under

the banner of transparency, and the reality of a space notable for what it does not say, expressed here by the visitors to the museum. Analysis by Lakier (2009) and Hutt (2006) demonstrates how the person of King Birendra was actively delinked from the institution of the palace in the aftermath of the 2001 massacre by re-casting what was a familial conflict as a threat to national sovereignty.<sup>30</sup> Lakier argues that the martyrdom of King Birendra gave people a space to voice their dissent against the institution of the monarchy (2009: 228-9). While the political decision to end the public route through the palace with the site of the murder of King Birendra intended to conscript the "essential mystery of royal authority" (Lakier 2009: 229) into the service of the nation, these visitors' voices reveal a transference of doubts to post-royal hierarchies, and serve to highlight the political instability of the 'new Nepal.'

### Conclusion

With the king no longer the source of cultural manifestations (including museums) in Nepal, the Narayanhiti Museum represents a paradigm shift that is just beginning and whose future will certainly not be straightforward or uncontested. The place of the royal palace has not yet been erased, and the creation of the non-place of the palace museum is not totally complete. This ambiguity and transience of meaning points to the shifting meaning of the city itself—positioned during the Panchayat period (1962-1990) as the symbolic center of the nation, and serving as the actual center of national political power, now destabilized by the push towards egalitarianism and democracy, rapid urban acceleration and the catastrophic effects of the 2015 earthquakes on the country.

Following King Birendra's death in 2001, the Narayanhiti Palace became associated with a collective exclusion from the truth. Adopting the globally understood institutional authority of the museum, Nepal's new government attempted to make both the palace and the monarchy benign by turning the building into a publicly owned space in 2008. The promised 'openness' of the museum is not about understanding the monarchy or its role in the recent conflict. Instead it seems to be a deliberate strategy to associate the royal family with the 'old' Nepal, and render the monarchy as 'harmless.' What the state is preserving is not the palace and its contents themselves, but their symbolic significance as a sign of political authority, legitimacy, and stability. It embodies the paradox between severing the royal past from the republican present and maintaining a sense of connection with the monarchy, by preserving what Nepal is no longer.

The transference of the palace into public hands was the final symbolic act that severed the institution of the monarchy from control over the state (Mocko 2012), yet the dominant national imaginary depended on the symbolism of the kingship. In order to protect the ideal of the nation, the Palace Museum adopted a sanitized history of the monarchy and picked up Birendra's memory as a way of constructing the present. This article has critically examined the ways in which different parties have used the palace museum to stage an image of a unified national identity through 'freezing time' within the palace walls.

The actions of both staff and visitors highlighted in this article reveal some of the ambiguities and contradictions that emerge from the remembering of Nepal's royal past in the Palace Museum. The Palace Museum highlights continuities with past hierarchies in both the behavior of the palace staff and the restrictions placed upon them, while the actions of visitors highlight uncertainty about the present and the future. However, in my experience, for those outside the palace walls, the cultivated neglect of the palace at the heart of the city has led to feelings of ambivalence. As the city and the nation continues to reinvent itself, the unchanging, carefully constructed non-place of the Palace Museum continues as an absence in the place of a previous identity.

Royal turf was chosen as the location for the process of creating new historical narratives, and as shown in the discussion above, the Narayanhiti Palace Museum is a museum of possibilities, hopes, and frustrations (Subedi 2009: 7). The Nepali sense of historical ambivalence experienced at this tumultuous time is reflected in the tight security around the perimeter of the Palace Museum, which is still guarded by the army—revealing both a sense of victory and confusion.

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Endless thanks are due for the patience of the author's supervisor, Michael Hutt. She is grateful to both Lekh Bahadur Karki and Rohit Dughana as Directors of the Palace Museum for the opportunity to work with their staff during field visits in 2013, 2014 and 2015; to Rukmani Gurung for her hours of patience while interviewing her and her colleagues about their work at the museum; to Ashesh Rajbansh, Editor of SPACES Magazine for the use of his excellent quality images to illustrate this article; and to Radhika Thapa, Rina Chaudhary, Janak Hamal, and Kabi Koirala who assisted with the author's research in July 2014. The author is also grateful to Kunal Tejbir Lama, her unofficial research mentor, and to the authors and special issue editors of this volume, Heather Hindman and Andrew Nelson, for coordinating the panel in 2014 and nurturing this paper into existence.

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## Endnotes

1. The palace compound of 754 *ropani* (Nepali unit of measurement roughly equivalent to just over 500 m<sup>2</sup>) is at the time of writing shared between regiments of the army, the chief of the army, the President's security force, the Palace Museum, the Queen Mother and the construction site for the *Ganatantra Smarak* (republic memorial).
2. The festival of *Dasain* is a lineage festival celebrated across the country.
3. There are four ticket categories: Nepali students 20 NRs; Nepali citizens 100 NRs; Chinese citizens and those from SAARC countries, 250 NRs; all other visitors 500 NRs.
4. By April 2015 the museum was receiving 2,800 visitors a month.
5. The first museum in Nepal was an arsenal museum (*silkhānā*) within a Kathmandu palace, possibly established by the then Prime Minister, Jang Bahadur Kunwar (Rana) in the 1860s (Gutschow 2011: 844). Initially accessed by guests of the Prime Minister, it was opened to the public in 1938 and nationalized by King Mahendra in 1967.
6. Documented in a detailed survey conducted under the auspices of the German Research Council in the 1980s (Gutschow et al. 1985).

7. The *dhungo* (stone—originally the stone upon which the first of the Shah dynasty was crowned king) was moved to Hanuman Dhoka, was used to refer to the *muluk* of the Shah kings and was synonymous with the palace (Lecomte-Tilouine 2009: 199).
8. See Weiler (2009) for an overview of the Rana Palaces.
9. Further research is required to identify the exact date of this move, though it being instigated by the Rana Prime Minister seems certain.
10. An earthquake in 1934 partially destroyed the main palace building.
11. The throne in the new building sits on a dais in the room named Gorkha, referring both to one of the 75 districts of Nepal and to the original kingdom of the Shah dynasty (Lecomte-Tilouine 2009: 203).
12. Rules of behaviour are printed on the back of the ticket. There are more rules on a ticket for a Nepali visitor than for a foreign visitor from a non-SAARC country.
13. It encourages us to think about what play visitors are encouraged to enact (Tarlo 2003: 44-54). See also Manjushree Thapa 2011, Sanjeev Uprety 2009 and Abhi Subedi 2009.
14. Since at least 2010, visitors have followed the route unaided, with tours available on request.
15. For example, the artists' impression published in *Himal Khabar Patrika* 15-29 June 2001.
16. *Narayanhiti parva: vistrut pratedan* (The Narayanhiti Incident: Full Report), n.p., n.d. Available from 246224 Bagbazaar, Kathmandu. Reference from Hutt 2006: 367).
17. A common story was of members of the royal family trying to sneak a Daimler-Benz, given to H.M. King Tribhuvan by Hitler, out of the Palace by night. See Mocko 2012 for interview with Dr. Govinda Kusum.
18. The Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation was involved until it had to focus its efforts on rebuilding, following the earthquakes of spring 2015.
19. The royal family themselves have been musealized with Queen Ratna located inside the grounds of the palace in Mahendra's private building.
20. This annual festival was once the only opportunity that the public had to enter the grounds of the palace. The main state rooms of the palace opened to visitors during the reign of King Birendra twice weekly, from 1993 to 1995 (Gorkhali 1993: 18-19).
21. See Mocko 2012: 409 onwards for a detailed discussion of the royal Dasain rituals.
22. These displays were prepared by King Gyanendra between 2002-2008.
23. This does not mean that visitors do not consider the political power wielded from within this palace, for example, Manjushree Thapa (2011: 211-225).
24. 180 out of the total of 724 were kept on for this purpose (*The Kathmandu Post*, 2008c).
25. In April/May 2015, the Supreme Court ruled that restricting the staff access to civil service positions was discriminatory.
26. The document aims to secure the future of the museum within the Narayanhiti compound.
27. When the museum was first established, it sat under the Ministry of Federal Affairs, Constituent Assembly, Parliamentary Affairs and Culture. It now sits under the Ministry for Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation.
28. They each had their own properties within the palace grounds; King Mahendra, Mahendra Manjil (1950s) and King Birendra, Sri Sadan (1960s)—both still extant.
29. A Palace Museum guide in March 2014 confirmed that these photographs were brought together from what was left across the site in order to populate the room.
30. Both Lakier (2009) and Hutt (2006) use the example of an editorial written by Baburam Bhattarai (then second in command of the CPN-Maoist) published in *Kantipur* and *The Kathmandu Post* on 3 June 2001.

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