

# **'Reflecting political allegiances through the design of the Narayanhiti Royal Palace' or 'The Narayanhiti Royal Palace, Kathmandu - a view from the interior'**

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## **Introduction**

The Narayanhiti Palace was built in Kathmandu, Nepal between 1961 and 1970 as a 'tangible rallying point' for the nation (Polk 1985: 94), an external symbol of a political memory designed to be transmitted to last (Assmann 2008: 55). It is intimately connected with the Nepalese institution of monarchy, specifically with the king. It stood as a symbol of the nation until 28 May 2008, when at the first meeting of the Constituent Assembly, the 239-year-old Shah monarchy was ended and the palace simultaneously turned into a museum. Now open to visitors as the Narayanhiti Palace Museum, the building holds an ambiguous position in the city and nation (Subedi 2009), embodying the paradox between the need to sever the royal past from the republican present, yet maintain a sense of connection with the culture from which the nation's identity has been derived. In this paper, I look back to the construction of a new royal memory in 1960s Nepal. This was a time when the monarchy held most of the state's executive powers, and Mahendra Shah was actively forging the nation in order to legitimize the new structures of his Panchayat system (Burghart 1993: 2). I ask how and why this palace building, designed by Californian architect Benjamin Polk, with state interiors by British firm Asprey & Company, was used to shape the politics of time and space in 1960s Nepal, and to make the Shah monarchy both conceivable and possible.

Between 1847 and 1951, Nepal was ruled de-facto by the Rana family of Prime Ministers (with support from the British) with the Shah kings kept as 'palace-bound figureheads' (Hutt 2014: 421). In 1950 Tribhuvan de-legitimized the Rana Prime Ministers who ostensibly ruled on behalf of the Shah monarch (Rose and Fisher 1970: 37), by leaving for Delhi with the support of the Nehru government in India. He returned to Nepal on 18 February 1951 to lead an embryonic democratic political structure that restored the legal authority of the king (Joshi and Rose 1966: 126). Mahendra inherited the throne in 1955 and immediately began to 'assert ... the palace as the supreme authority of the country' (Dangol 1999: 67). On 15 December 1960, he implemented a bloodless coup and placed himself as the executive head of government. Two years later he gifted a new constitution to the nation (Burghart 1993: 13) and introduced his system of partyless Panchayat democracy. The implementation of the Panchayat system came hand in hand with a series of measures that actively suppressed opposition and promoted his vision. His reinvention of the monarchy as 'the definer of nationalism, the protector of Nepal's sovereignty and the bringer of development' (Mocko 2012: 88) required the monarchy to appeal both to tradition and modernity: He was simultaneously a Hindu king who protected and guided his country and a modern political leader concerned with the development and progress of a nation state.

As an objective manifestation of this new royal memory the new Narayanhiti Palace was both representative and constitutive of Mahendra's role in constructing the Panchayat system (Malagodi 2015: 75). It was cultivated as a symbol to highlight his appeal to both tradition and modernity, presented as a modern form of a pre-existing concern (HMG 1976). The palace physically orchestrated the city-space around it, through its dominant position at the head of a new axis. Mahendra expressed his aim 'to constitute political relations so that they were in harmony with the traditional order' (Burghart 1993: 1). The palace was an object around which he narrated a selected past and through this process he developed a stable

image and identity for the monarchy for the future. This is evident through the ways in which Mahendra turned to Nepalese (specifically Newar) forms, in direct contrast to the neoclassical buildings of the Ranas, in order to emphasize the internally generated authenticity of Nepal and to legitimize his rule. Therefore, although the Narayanhiti palace was a steel-frame, concrete building,<sup>1</sup> designed by a Californian architect, Benjamin Polk; contemporary official narratives emphasized the Nepali-ness of its design; the hipped pagoda roof with the pinnacle modelled on the Shah palace at Nuwakot, the temple tower, the vast doors decorated in bronze plate and designed by Nepali artist Balkrishna Sama, and the use of brick as a facing material.<sup>2</sup>

This paper presents findings from my doctoral research, as part of which I have identified the particular intersections of social relations that made up the identities of the space of the palace during its construction in the 1960s and the first few years of its operation. Influenced by the work of architectural historian, Kim Dovey, I have approached my research through consideration of the discursive bases of the Palace design (representation), the processes of its creation (practice) and its use as a theatrical backdrop to state events (experience) (Dovey 1999). The 2016 workshop from which this paper developed, focused on a critical examination of relationships between Britain and Nepal over the past 200 years. I adopt the interior as a mode of spatial enquiry in an effort to disrupt the official narratives inscribed around the palace during the 1960s and 1970s. In so doing, this paper reveals continuities in practice with the identity-building practices of the Rana prime ministers whose rule relied on a progressively closer political alignment with Britain (Whelpton 2005: 50).

When considering built form, dominant models of history have granted privileges to the visual, and to structures of enclosure and containment. In a particular challenge to this mode of presenting architectural history, set within the discourse of an emerging profession of interior design (e.g. Gigli *et al.* 2007), Attiwill argued that the interior is not limited to be inside built form (Attiwill 2004: 1). The experiential nature of the interior as ‘a platform in which to project lifestyle; a place to benchmark fashionable social mores, to test patterns of behaviour and ritual’ (Hollis *et al.* 2007: xi), suggests a need to consider additional patterns, of use and inhabitation. Adopting an inside out point of view, starting from the interior space of the palace, the first thing we see are state rituals taking place within an arrangement of European chandeliers, British furniture, carpets and wall-coverings.<sup>3</sup> What, therefore, is the relationship between the interior space of the palace, and the official national narratives inscribed around the palace, that played up traditionalism and were defined by its exterior? Nepal no longer has a Hindu king, and the current de- and re-construction of the narratives used by the Nepali elite to define, construct, promote and legitimize a distinctive Nepali national identity make it particularly pertinent to continue to re-visit these construction mechanisms.

The Panchayat system was at its height when the palace was constructed, but then became progressively delegitimized and ended in 1990. From 1990 to 2006, Nepal experienced multiparty democracy, violent insurgency, royal massacre, royal coup and the abolition of the monarchy. Since the 2006 comprehensive peace agreement and subsequent elections in 2008

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<sup>1</sup> It used steel from India and cement from Britain that arrived in steel drums (Shanker Nath Rimal, *personal communication*, Kathmandu, 6 April 2012).

<sup>2</sup> For example the official palace guide, 1976. The Chinese brick and tile factory was inaugurated on 11 March 1969, so this could be argued to simultaneously be a symbol of modernity.

<sup>3</sup> These continuities also challenge the usual periodization of architecture in Kathmandu, that is aligned with political events, e.g. Malla period, post-Gorkha conquest, Rana, post 1951, etc.

and 2013, Nepal has been undergoing yet another transition as a secular republic in the midst of negotiating the implementation of a new constitution (2015-17). This changing landscape places us in a unique position to question the social and historical frameworks that have dictated how we perceive the palace and the processes and ideologies that have given it meaning.

Despite the prominent location of the Narayanhiti Palace in Kathmandu, it remains absent from all architectural discourse relating to Nepal. The detail of the design process outlined in this article was not published at the time of the construction of the palace and to date no in-depth study has been undertaken into the design process, the design itself or any contemporary interpretation of this palace.<sup>4</sup> I rely therefore, on the written word of the designers, archival research and semi-structured interviews with those involved in the design process. As I will develop in some detail below, this absence can be explained by two key factors; first, the codes of deference and secrecy put in place by the monarchy (Hutt 2006), and second, the conditioning force of Nepal's semi-colonial experience (Nelson 2011).

### **The silent complicity of the palace**

Mahendra's system of Panchayat democracy had a pyramidal structure with direct elections only taking place at the most local level. The king claimed it was restorative, 'rooted in the life of the people' (Gupta 1993: 255) and that it would strengthen the voice of the people. In banning all political parties, strictly controlling the public sphere (including the media) and offering just a semblance of representation, it had the opposite effect (Burghart 1993). The king stood above the constitution (Gupta 1993: 261) at the centre of a royally-ordained political order (Hutt 2014: 422).

Mahendra revealed his intention to build a new palace in 1959 and commissioned designs soon after. The construction of the new palace building would have been a major affair, involving the demolition not only of a large part of the earlier (Rana) Narayanhiti Palace, but several other Rana palaces as well, in order to create a major North-South axis (now known as *Darbar Marg* or King's Way). Many people in Kathmandu would have experienced the disruption of this physical imposition of power in this prominent part of the city, yet it is almost impossible to find contemporary references to either the construction work or the inauguration in use of the new building.<sup>5</sup> Bourdieu argues that 'The most successful ideological effects are those that have no words, and ask no more than complicitous silence' (1977: 188). The physical pulling apart and reconstruction of a significant part of the city contrasts with this relegation to the unquestioned frame of events. The 'things that should not be said' (Hutt 2006: 360) about the palace in public space illustrate the complicity of the architecture of the palace with social order, specifically the role of the monarch who had complete control of the public sphere.

Bourdieu's concept of the *habitus* can explain how the palace's physical location within grounds bounded by high walls impacts on its apparent invisibility. The *habitus* explains the

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<sup>4</sup> Except for an article published by Sushmita Ranjit in SPACES Magazine in late 2009, after the Monarchy was abolished and the king had left the palace.

<sup>5</sup> In contrast to this: when the British Queen, Elizabeth the Second visited Kathmandu in 1961, several articles in *The Rising Nepal* (English language version of state owned daily Gorkhapatra) discussed the new road built to connect the airport to the palace. Published volumes of King Mahendra's speeches include those given at the inauguration of contemporary buildings such as the Supreme Court and the Royal Nepal Army Headquarters (all demonstrating the king's service to the nation – *desa-sewa*) but not the palace (which would draw attention to his position at the top of the political order). See for example Tuladhar (1968).

embodied dispositions we have towards everyday social practice, including the division of the space of the city. Comprising forms of habit and habitat, habitus is a term borrowed from architecture and is seen by Bourdieu as a way of unconsciously, bodily knowing the world (1990: 210). The habitus is a form of ideology in the sense that what is perceived as natural, is in fact a socially constructed vision, in this case through the physical framing of space and the restriction of access through the imposition of high walls around the perimeter of the palace that continue to be manned by army personnel. For Bourdieu, space frames social practice and the social divisions and hierarchies created and shaped by this perimeter boundary have been sustained and reproduced since the mid-nineteenth century, when the Ranas jealously guarded access to goods, electricity, education within the ranks of the palace – an aristocratic inside (*bhitra*) space, conceived of as separate from outside (*bahira*), and delineated by the walls of the palace compound (Rana 1986: 90, Weiler 2009: 137). During the Rana period, neighbourhoods and streets were carefully controlled and the space around the perimeter of the palace was one of fear (Bajracharya 2008: 42-44). The separation between ruler and ruled continued during the Panchayat with the result that generations of Nepalis were prevented from crossing through the palace compound, or even viewing the palace interior. Everyday life in present-day Kathmandu continues to be framed by the boundary walls that control access to the palace compound: Kathmandu residents move around the perimeter of the palace, taking the walls for granted and this is the palace's silent complicity. In application of Bourdieu's habitus to architectural theory, the architectural historian Kim Dovey argued that 'the more that structures and representations of social practice can be embedded in the framework of everyday life, the less questionable they become and the more effectively they work' (2002: 291). I contend that the construction of the new palace building behind the walls of the palace compound contributed to the lack of public scrutiny of its design.<sup>6</sup> According to Bourdieu, the complicitous silence of the palace may ultimately be the source of its deepest power (1977: 188).

### **Playing up tradition**

Although Nepal avoided direct colonization, its experience was intimately connected with British colonial power in the subcontinent. Following British victory, the 1816 British-Nepal Sagauli treaty granted Nepal internal autonomy, in exchange for imperial control over trade and foreign policy. Nepal's southern borders became fixed and the British appointed a permanent representative in Kathmandu. It is now widely accepted that the country's experience is semi-colonial (e.g. Seddon *et al.* 1979, Des Chene 2007) and hence also in part postcolonial (Harrison 2009). Nelson argues that this conditioning force made certain practices and logics of the state and monarchy possible, including the quest for a homogenous Nepali national identity (2011: 4). Foreignness as a dynamic in Nepali political history has been used 'as the basis for a contrastive awareness vis-à-vis other regions and powers, and as a resource for constructing identities and social distinction' (Leichty 1997: 9). For example, Newar castes have long tried to establish their status by claiming royal Indian lineages (Gellner and Pradhan 1991: 161). The Rana Prime Ministers appropriated European goods and adopted European cultural practices in order to reposition and distinguish themselves from ordinary Nepalis and align themselves to the British. In contrast, Mahendra emphasized the use of Newari architectural forms for key occasions of state ritual. For example, the coronation platform upon which Mahendra and Ratna were crowned king and queen in 1956 (*mandapa*) was crowned with two tiered roofs, of which the coronation book commented: 'It

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<sup>6</sup> Planning and curation of the memorials' contents continue in private and under the direct auspices of the office of the Prime Minister (Interview Macha Kaji Maharjan, DUDBC, July 2015).

looks just like a pagoda. This indicates that the Royal sovereigns are the objects of worship next to God' (Rajbhandari, 1956: xxi).

For the king to have legitimacy, the nation had to remain Hindu and Mahendra claimed to uncover the natural alignment of ruler, realm, and subject (an indivisible body politic) that had been the nation's inheritance since Prithvinarayan Shah.<sup>7</sup> He asserted this to be a contiguity usurped by the Ranas and sullied by the political parties and in this context, the use of the pagoda form was claimed to be restorative.<sup>8</sup> The coronation was attended by representatives from countries all over the world, and use of the pagoda form was intended to emphasize his role as the world's only Hindu king and Nepal's national independence.

Contemporary writers referred to the Newari architecture of the Kathmandu Valley and the category of Nepali architecture interchangeably. For example, in *The Nepalese Perspective*, directed at an English-speaking audience in 1972, Sharma states 'It is this architecture that is unlike anything [an outsider] would get to see in India or anywhere else' (Sharma 1972: 20). Also in *The Nepalese Perspective*, Manandhar writes that the pagoda form 'preserves [Nepal's] own special position in the cultural history of the world' and that it has 'acquainted the outside world with us' (1969: 11).<sup>9</sup> The architectural discourse of style in Nepal is often articulated through the rhetoric of modern and traditional, a dichotomy that is mapped onto the spatial categories of foreign and native (Grieve 2006: 34). This differentiation is associated with colonial ways of seeing and representation and is essentially political (Hosagrahar 2005, Chattophadyay 2006). The decision to use an augmented Newari pagoda roof for the coronation *mandapa* represented an attempt to create a temporal distance from the Rana regime and their use of foreign forms. In doing so it perpetuated a foreign mode of looking at Kathmandu buildings that gave preference to traditional forms.

The official decision to play up the traditional elements of the Narayanhiti palace design in order to give it a traditional guise (Malagodi 2015: 75) can be understood therefore, in response to the narrative of the destruction of the traditional and native form by modern and foreign forces that was born out of the ending of the Rana regime.<sup>10</sup> According to this narrative, 'the ancestral buildings like ... the south western front of the Hanuman Dhoka Darbar can only be found in the Valley of Kathmandu', whereas the Narayanhiti Palace was part of a growing 'unenviable wilderness of reinforced concrete buildings' (Malla 1967: 8).<sup>11</sup> That this model persists, is shown by Nelson who, in the following quotation, evaluates the Narayanhiti Palace in relation to western notions of modernity.

'At the time of its inauguration in 1969, Narayanhiti Palace was intended to signal a modern and forward-looking architecture. Looking back, Narayanhiti stands not as a

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<sup>7</sup> Speech given on 15 December 1961 (Tuladhar 1968: 20).

<sup>8</sup> Photographs of the Mandapa used by Tribhuvan in 1913 show a simple hipped roof, e.g. Madhan Puruskar Pustakalaya [https://www.flickr.com/photos/mpp\\_flr/albums/72157629626130677](https://www.flickr.com/photos/mpp_flr/albums/72157629626130677), accessed 23 August 2017.

<sup>9</sup> When Mahendra's son, Birendra was crowned in 1975, a similar, but much more elaborate platform was constructed, later dismantled and transferred to the Botanical Garden in Godavari. The proportions of the tiered roofs and carved decoration were enlarged and mark a deliberate exaggeration of anything dating back to the Malla era (12<sup>th</sup>–18<sup>th</sup> century rulers of the cities of the Kathmandu Valley), which was seen as the golden era of Nepali architecture, (see Gutschow 2011a).

<sup>10</sup> As Liechty (1997: 6) concluded, 'stories of Nepal's relationship with foreign goods and cultural practices before 1951 have been – like the Rana palaces and the foreign objects themselves – at best neglected as irrelevant, and at worst actively reviled as instances of cultural contamination'.

<sup>11</sup> In Kathmandu, this model is enacted through the projects of UNESCO and foreign governments which have, since 1963, entered Nepal with the objective of preserving the country's architectural heritage, e.g. Pruscha 1975.

beacon of modernity, but rather as a symbol of the failure of Nepali architecture to establish a modern style' (Nelson 2009: 60).

Such aesthetic judgments have led to the neglect of Narayanhiti Palace by architectural historians, foreign and Nepali alike, and the palace continues to prompt ambivalent readings and reactions.<sup>12</sup> Rather than perpetuate what Nelson describes as the tragedy of Nepali architecture by focusing on questions of style and authenticity, I suggest the adoption of a contextual approach (Hosagrahar 2005: 7). Acceptance of the socially constructed identities of the palace enables the exploration of what have been presented as formal contradictions and a lack of coherence, i.e. the adoption of dominant European concepts into the design of a Nepali royal palace.

### **The Narayanhiti Palace as a modern administrative centre**

The Narayanhiti Palace was built as a public statement that spoke loudly of the character of the Nepali state, as Mahendra wished it to be perceived at a time when nation-states were imagined as being integrally related to bounded space. Yet its ability to act as a representation of the nation goes beyond its physical appearance and is deeply rooted to the Shah dynasty's unitary conception of kingship, in which king, throne and palace are all representations of the entire kingdom (Lecomte-Tilouine 2009: 198). This section offers a brief historical perspective to the political and spatial context in 1959, within which Mahendra commissioned the designs for the new palace building at Narayanhiti.

King Prithvi Bir Bikram Shah (1875-1911) was moved to the Narayanhiti Palace in the 1880s by the then Rana Prime Minister, Ranoddip Singh Kunwar Rana (1825-1885), deliberately disassociating him from the palaces from within which he drew his authority.<sup>13</sup> Rana family sources state that Ranoddip's successor, Bir Shamsheer, later extended the building and made it into a permanent royal palace (Rana, P-S 1978: 78-91, Sever 1993: 208).<sup>14</sup> The Narayanhiti Palace was described by Perceval Landon as 'a fine building based upon Government House in Calcutta' (Landon 1928, volume 2: 79). It was one of 41 palace buildings built by the Rana family that shifted the centre of control outside the ritually defined borders of the town, towards the Bagmati river, and contrasted in appearance and scale to the existing buildings to create an imposing landscape.<sup>15</sup>

Shah kingship was anchored in space, 'associated with the person of the sovereign and the place of his coronation, a summit or a stone, and is reinforced by the presence of the family goddess' (Lecomte-Tilouine 2009: 198). The move to Narayanhiti separated the body of the king for the first time in the recorded history of the Shah dynasty from the location of his

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<sup>12</sup> For example, 'overall the palace is eclectic and surreal' (Ranjit 2009: 43), a 'towering pink folly' and 'Versailles in Green Nylon' (Anonymous 2009.).

<sup>13</sup> Further research is required to identify the exact date of this move, though it seems certain that it was instigated by the Rana Prime Minister. According to Lecomte-Tilouine (2009) the anchoring of Shah kingship in space is reinforced by the presence of the Shah's tutelary deity *Kalika*. I have found no evidence to suggest that *Kalika* was ever moved to the palace at Narayanhiti.

<sup>14</sup> From archival sources, photographs of the building as well as historical accounts of events, architectural historian Eric Theophile concludes that the palace was probably extended in 1888 upon the marriage of two of Bir Shamsheer's daughters to king Prithvi Bir. He refers to royal decrees which claim land at the site in 1886 and the extension of roads in 1890. These marriages between the Rana and Shah families were an important part of policy.

<sup>15</sup> See Weiler (2009) for an overview of the Rana Palaces. See Leichty (1997) for analysis of how these new strategies of visual distinction prioritised seeing and being seen; they enabled the Ranas to increasingly secularize authority and position themselves as those with the right to rule.

coronation, the ritually significant Hanuman Dhoka Palace.<sup>16</sup> Since 1768 this had been the Central Sanctuary of Nepal (Rajbhandari, 1956: 7), where the central location of the temple of the tutelary goddess of the Malla kings, had enabled the king to socially construct his position in the kingdom since its unification.<sup>17</sup> The move also dislocated the king from the source of his divine power,<sup>18</sup> the Shah dynasty's tutelary goddess in the palace-cum-temple at Gorkha that served as a mountain shrine to the origins of the Shah dynasty.<sup>19</sup> This careful disaggregation of the core elements of Shah kingship that had developed as the basis of their right to rule was more than symbolic: it had the very real effect of preventing the Shah kings from regaining control of the country for many years. Activities relating to the active governance of the country no longer took place in the palace where the king resided, and the Singha Darbar built by the prime minister Chandra Shamsher Rana in 1903 became the nerve centre of government.

When the Narayanhiti Palace became the active seat of governance after the end of Rana rule and King Tribhuvan's triumphant return from India in 1951,<sup>20</sup> official rhetoric linked the purity and distinctiveness of the Nepali nation-state to the monarch (Bajracharya 2008: 53) and this re-invention of the monarchy was critical to how the nation's identity was actively re-conceived.<sup>21</sup> Although Mahendra claimed the Panchayat system to be restorative, he was clearly creating a political culture (Burghart 1993: 2). He adopted the notion of self-determination that many were using to de-legitimize colonial rule through the concept of nation-building (*desa banaune*). In this case the nation (and the monarch) was held as the source of legitimacy for the state, but to do this, the state had to first forge the nation. For the first time, the 1962 constitution defined the nation, national flag, national anthem, national language and even a national flower, colour, animal and bird. Every Nepali had to wear a *topi* (parbatiya hat) on entering Singha Darbar (the general secretariat) as a symbol of personal identification with the nation (Borgstrom 1976: 16). This emphasis on Nepali traditions was a key part of the official rhetoric of the Panchayat system that was heavily promoted through propaganda and schooling. The new palace, Mahendra's administrative centre, was to be a

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<sup>16</sup> Except for the seasonal moves discussed by Burghart 1996: 243

<sup>17</sup> When Prithvinarayan Shah (1723-1775) conquered the three affluent and prestigious kingdoms of the Kathmandu Valley in 1768-69, he appropriated the palace of the deposed Malla king of Kathmandu, and received the blessing of the living incarnation of the Malla's tutelary deity, the *Kumari* on the evening of Indra Jatra in order to legitimize his sovereignty (*Padmagiri Vamshavali* in Hasrat) by positioning the Shah monarchy as the rightful, Hindu kings at the centre of a 'ritually core territory' (Whelpton 2005: 56).

<sup>18</sup> In 1893, when he came of age, in a test of his strength against the Rana Prime Minister (then Bir Shamsher), Prithvi Bir packed up all his possessions and moved back to the Hanuman Dhoka Palace (Sever 1993: 209). This situation is said to have lasted for about a month after which the king returned to the Narayanhiti Palace. Whether this is true or apocryphal, it marks out the Narayanhiti Palace as somewhere the king did not choose to be.

<sup>19</sup> See Gutschow 2011: 167. It was visited by Shah kings as part of their pre-coronation rites (Witzel 1987: 437) and annually as part of the sovereign affirming festival of *Dasain* (Mocko 2012: 422).

<sup>20</sup> In discussions with ex-princess Ketaki Chester, she stated as a matter of fact that king Tribhuvan never considered going back to Hanuman Dhoka, for reasons perhaps best expressed by Emily Polk in the context of King Mahendra's similar decision to remain at Narayanhiti (see page 10). By this time army troops were also positioned at the Narayanhiti Palace.

<sup>21</sup> In contrast to this, the Rana regime was portrayed as an autocratic blip which created an artificial separation between the Shah and Rana dynasties (members of the Rana family were made to leave their palaces, which stood empty as symbols of the evacuation of their occupants).

symbol of the Nepali nation,<sup>22</sup> created by the king – ‘the first focus for the pride and culture of modern Nepal’ (Polk 1985: 94).<sup>23</sup>

Little is known about the chronology of the palace buildings at Narayanhiti.<sup>24</sup> A large earthquake in 1934 caused serious structural damage to the main Rana palace building, though it was subsequently restored, adapted and continued in use. There were several residences within the walls of the compound: Tribhuvan lived in a smaller property to the north of, and adjoining the main palace building,<sup>25</sup> and as Crown Prince, Mahendra had his own residence in the palace grounds (Leuchtag 1958: 168).<sup>26</sup> The official palace building then served as a symbol, used not as a residence, but for official activities.<sup>27</sup>

Mahendra does not appear to have considered re-locating back to the Hanuman Dhoka palace for reasons expressed here by Emily Polk, wife of the palace’s architect:

‘The king has several palaces, but they are in the old part of Katmandu [sic], and they are very ancient. They are 600 to 1,000 years old and, of course, absolutely filthy dirty. They could never be cleaned. Everything is just saturated with ancientness. It was not an administrative core. There was no administrative section and no place for him to live... He decided he was a modern king, he was going to have this whole new thing’<sup>28</sup>

### Designing the exterior

Mahendra invited several foreign architects to propose designs for his new palace.<sup>29</sup> It is not clear if these invitations were overlapping (an informal competition), or if each relationship was struck up in turn.<sup>30</sup> Comparison of a sketch plan by Robert Weise with that of the existing building suggests a level of clarity of the functional requirements of the palace as both show a similar division of space between guest, state and private functions. A second comparison, this time between the concept sketch by Robert Weise and the final design by

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<sup>22</sup> The term Nepal did not refer to the nation-state of Nepal until the 1920s when the British used it in reference to the entire country, previously known as Gorkha. The national language, too, changed in title at this time from Gorkhali to Nepali (see Burghart 1996: 253 and Whelpton, 2005: 85).

<sup>23</sup> The official 1976 guide to the palace states that the palace at Gorkha was for sanctuary and defence, and the palace at Hanuman Dhoka for ritual.

<sup>24</sup> Jang Bahadur Rana possibly built the original buildings for his fourth brother Ranodip Singh (1825-1885) in 1847, though this date is questioned by Theophile (1992) based on an analysis of stylistic details. This in turn can be shown to follow the location of the British Residency.

<sup>25</sup> Known now as Tribhuvan Sadhan, part of which was recently demolished following the massacre of 1 June 2001 of the then king and queen.

<sup>26</sup> Erika Leuchtag describes Mahendra and his wife showing their palace, probably a wing of the old official palace building (1958: 168). Later, Mahendra Manjil was constructed just inside the south gate to the north of the Narayan temple complex.

<sup>27</sup> After Mahendra became king he is credited with the demolition of the South wing of the palace building, an action Purushottam Rana, perhaps unsurprisingly, attributes to his *purkheli sanak* (ancestral anger) and his desire to break with the recent past (2007: 36).

<sup>28</sup> Polk, E. 1994. Oral history transcript deposited in the archives at the Society of Women Geographers in NYC.

<sup>29</sup> Engineer Shankar Nath Rimal (personal communication, Kathmandu, 6 April 2012). The architects were Minoru Yamasaki, Emery Roth & Sons (World Trade Centre), Martin Burn, Robert Weise and Benjamin Polk. pp.190-191.

<sup>30</sup> Kai Weise (Robert Weise’s son) recalls that his father’s project (February 1960) fell through due to a misunderstanding with the royal aid-de-camp (personal communication, Kathmandu, 8 July 2013).

Polk, reveals a clear symbolic break from the neoclassical Rana past.<sup>31</sup> The Ranas used the neoclassical style to distinguish themselves from their population and symbolically strive towards equality with the British (Weiler 2009). When seen side by side, the designs of Robert Weise and Benjamin Polk suggest that the form of the palace exterior (of a modern Hindu monarch) was required to draw upon traditional (Newar) forms, as both are defined by their adoption of a tiered pagoda roof as a dominant aspect of the design.

The designs by Benjamin Polk (1916-2001), a Californian with a commercially successful joint practice in Calcutta (1957-1964) were accepted in 1961 after Polk had paid a personal visit to the king.<sup>32</sup> Polk professed his purpose in designing the palace as ‘to feel why the ancient buildings were as they were, to understand the people and to work freshly’ (Polk 1993a: 9).<sup>33</sup> This emphasis on understanding the spirit of the place was popular in the 1960s and considers one of the primary functions of buildings as being to orientate, to tell us where we are. It suggests questions of authenticity and of course authority, in who decides what is authentic:

‘The Palace with its high central throne room and its even higher temple spire to the right would be a recollection – about which might cohere visually once again a Nepali purpose – a will that is needed to solve today’s long-term problems and to maintain independence from its two giant neighbours’ (Polk 1993a: 8).

Polk emphasized the palace as a tool for reconciling the past and the present and his writings show him to have been aware of the Panchayat rhetoric and King Mahendra’s theory of monarchy. However, he entered Nepal for business meetings only and in his search for the authentic, he seems to have not strayed far outside the Kathmandu Valley.<sup>34</sup> He and his wife Emily returned to the USA in 1964, leaving a government engineer Shankar Nath Rimal, to oversee the construction of the palace.<sup>35</sup> Although Polk writes that he offered continuity, it is more accurate to view his role as one of re-arranging fragments of an existing world into an imagined one, using what he had to hand, and directed by the words of the king.

Construction began in 1964 and was overseen by a committee chaired by Prince Gyanendra.<sup>36</sup> Benjamin Polk’s discussions on the design of the palace were mediated through the committee via Shankar Nath Rimal, a process he found frustrating.<sup>37</sup> The committee approved such design changes as, the use of brick (associated with tradition) rather than

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<sup>31</sup> This narrative was dominant at the time, which is emphasized in the writing of both Benjamin Polk and the recollections of Emily Polk.

<sup>32</sup> Polk was no stranger to the use of design to support the construction of national identity, as he also designed India’s first national memorial, the *Jallianwalabagh* in Amritsar in 1961. The king had heard about his design for the Tripikata Buddhist library and research centre in Rangoon, a project funded by the Ford Foundation (Polk 1985: 94).

<sup>33</sup> Polk was invited to travel to Pagan to examine the architecture there, an experience that was to heavily influence his design methodology in Nepal. In discussing his work in Nepal, he suggests studying the past intently and then dismissing it from your conscious mind.

<sup>34</sup> This is confirmed by Isaacson *et al.* (2001).

<sup>35</sup> Interview with Shankar Nath Rimal (Kathmandu, 6 April 2012). According to Emily, Benjamin Polk planned to set up a new office in New York and she had a fever (Polk 1994: 243). Significantly, within the palace community Rimal is known as the architect of the palace.

<sup>36</sup> Personal communication with Ketaki Chester who remembers receiving regular progress reports.

<sup>37</sup> Interviews with both Edward Asprey (4 January 2013) and S.N. Rimal (Kathmandu, 5 July 2013).

marble as a facing material, and the commissioning of artist Bal Krishna Sama (an anti-Rana nationalist) to design the ceremonial entrance doorway to the main reception room.<sup>38</sup>

Benjamin Polk expected to be involved in designing the interior furnishings of the new palace, and whilst he remained in India (1985, 93-94), his wife Emily Polk resided in Kathmandu from 1962 to 1963 and began work on designs based on what she described as ‘indigenous idioms’ she found depicted in the paintings at the Ajanta caves in Maharashtra State, India, in an attempt to re-connect the Shah royal family with their Hindu roots (Polk 1994: 237).<sup>39</sup> Her drawings suggest an intention to use expensive materials such as ebony and animal skin and I have not found any evidence that her designs were presented to the king.<sup>40</sup> In 1968, the London firm Asprey & Company, who had long associations with the British monarchy<sup>41</sup> and who were familiar to the king,<sup>42</sup> were offered the contract to design the state interiors of the palace.

### **Designing the interior**

The Narayanhiti Palace commission enabled Algernon Asprey to establish a successful business model, that saw him win successive royal commissions for huge palaces across the Middle East.<sup>43</sup> In the late 1960s, he also designed the interiors for the Nassaria Guest Palace in Riyadh.<sup>44</sup> I consider the particular business practices that made this possible, before giving a brief account of the design process for the interior of the palace.

Asprey was founded in 1781 as an ironmongery. The company was run by different members of the family with varying degrees of success. Through the manufacture of high quality goods and a series of shrewd take-overs, the company made ever more grandiose products, which by the 1920s included custom-made commissions for patrons such as Indian Maharajas.<sup>45</sup> From the middle of the nineteenth century, as exhibitions became both a product and tool of Empire, the firm used their setting to create a reputation for itself in Britain as a practitioner of good design and offering a quintessentially British product. In 1851, Charles Asprey described the role his merchandise was intended to play in upholding the identity-creation of his clientele, as purveyors of superior taste, as follows: ‘articles of exclusive design and high quality, whether for personal adornment or personal accompaniment and to endow with richness and beauty the tables and homes of people of refinement and discernment’ (Hillier 1981: 115).

This process reached its epitome when in 1862, Asprey’s won a gold medal for excellence in dressing cases and took first place among the exhibitors of their class (Hillier 1981: 36).

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<sup>38</sup> Interview with S.N. Rimal, Kathmandu, 6 April 2012. Balkrishna Sama (previously Shamsheer) was one of the contributors to an edited volume, published in India, celebrating the life and work of Nepali poet Bhanubhakta in 1940 (to mark the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death) and therefore in developing what Onta describes as a *bir* history of Nepal (Onta 1996).

<sup>39</sup> Oral history transcript deposited at the Society of Women Geographers, New York.

<sup>40</sup> Held at National Womens Museum of Art, NYC.

<sup>41</sup> They held royal warrants at the time as jewellers and silversmiths (1940).

<sup>42</sup> Interview with Edward Asprey (4 January 2013) confirmed the long-standing family connection that continues to this day .

<sup>43</sup> He established his own business in Bruton Street in 1971. See also Asprey, A. 1975. *In Bruton Street*. London: Algernon Asprey, in the collections of the National Art Library, London TL.ASP2.11.

<sup>44</sup> By 1976 he was working on his seventh.

<sup>45</sup> Maharajas of Patiala and Cooch Behar, the Gaekwar of Baroda and the Sultan of Lahore. The biggest commission came in 1930 when the princes stayed in London hotels for the Round Table Conference on India.

Unlike other British luxury houses that opened showrooms in British India, particularly Calcutta, Asprey's only showroom was on London's Bond Street.<sup>46</sup> Their business opened up overseas following the Second World War, through the establishment of both antique furniture and interior decoration departments led by Algernon Asprey.<sup>47</sup> Despite the size of his commissions (from 1.5 to 2 million British pounds) and the fact that they involved exporting British craftsmanship worldwide,<sup>48</sup> Algernon Asprey's work received little public recognition in Britain.<sup>49</sup> I suggest that this can be in part explained by the nature of the goods produced by Asprey for his royal clients, which were both representative in nature, and utilized cheaper, exotic materials that gave the impression of wealth. Writing about the challenges and constraints that stemmed from working with royal clients, Asprey reflected on the role of the latter:

‘the client is himself an object, fulfilling a symbolic function within the context of his country's history. Consequently, the objects he commissions ... not only have to embody certain symbolic devices, but must be seen to enhance the dignity of the patron and stand up to the passage of time when passed on from one generation to another’ (Artley 1980: 7).

Designing for royalty is usually associated with the use of precious or fine materials, and with exquisite craftsmanship. Whether they had the available funds, or not, Algernon Asprey's foreign royal clients, including Mahendra Shah, appear to have preferred appearance to substance. The goods produced by Asprey met ‘the shrunken budget with leather, macassar ebony and gold tooling in place of real gold and diamonds’ (Hughes 1976 in Artley 1980: 14), and used easily recognizable symbolic elements – such as ‘Arabian flavoured doorknobs and fittings’ (Hughes 1976 in Artley 1980: 14).<sup>50</sup> Algernon's business practice during this period, of large-scale team projects, which relied on a certain amount of standardization, contrasted with the accepted (western) understanding of luxury, that valued individual craftsmanship and placed emphasis on the exclusive and the unique.

Algernon Asprey was responsible for designing the complete set of state interiors inside the Narayanhiti Palace.<sup>51</sup> The project took about 18 months and during this period Asprey stayed in Kathmandu for weeks at a time. He developed each of his designs following meetings with the king to discuss design requirements for particular spaces. After each meeting, he would return to his room in the Soaltee Hotel and quickly produce perspective sketches that once approved, would form the design drawing for the team on site (Artley 1980: 7).<sup>52</sup> The

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<sup>46</sup> Interview with Edward Asprey, 4 January 2013.

<sup>47</sup> Whilst this business was modest at first, it built momentum on the basis of the patronage of the Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie, who visited the shop when he was exiled in London during the war. He built a good relationship with Algernon Asprey, and Aspreys in fact paid his hotel bill – something he did not forget. In the 1960s Algernon Asprey was invited to decorate Haile Selassie's palace in Addis Ababa. This palace is credited with opening access to new networks and connections. Unfortunately, following the sale of the family firm in the 1990s, many archives were destroyed and it is not possible to detect the beginning of Asprey's association with the Nepali monarchy – though he is known to have completed work for Tribhuvan.

<sup>48</sup> He himself owned a series of small firms, including Percy Bass, curtain makers and upholsterers

<sup>49</sup> The official Asprey history (Hillier 1981) does not cover this period, at least partly due to a family dispute at the time of publication.

<sup>50</sup> This text is not critical in itself, but the mention of these points suggests criticism from other quarters of the design community. Edward Asprey pointed to his father's use of sycamore, a wood that can be stained any colour (in the case of Mahendra's official desk – stained black to look like ebony).

<sup>51</sup> This was possibly the largest contract of its kind being handled by a UK private firm at the time. Algernon Asprey Exhibition, Goldsmiths Hall, 1976. V&A NK.94.0125.

<sup>52</sup> Shankar-Nath Rimal remembers him sketching in front of him (Kathmandu, 05 July 2013].

majority of pieces were especially commissioned from a range of small manufacturers across the UK and Europe, produced and flown in (on a Britannia aircraft), making this a complex team project. This included everything from the fibrous plasters mouldings for the decoration of the Lamjung dining room ceiling to the 50-foot chandelier in the Gorkha (throne) room designed by Harry Rath of Lobmeyer, Vienna in conjunction with Algernon Asprey (Artley 1980: 46), the office desk used in the king's official office, the Gulmi Room designed by Gordon Russell of Broadway, Worcestershire and landscape paintings by Asprey's chief artist and designer James Porteous Wood (lining the *Bajura* room).<sup>53</sup>

Asprey wrote that when designing for royalty it was necessary for the designed object or interior to provide a vehicle for the display of fine indigenous craftsmanship, for example the wooden staircase connecting the main reception room (*Kaski Baithak*) to the throne room on the second floor (*Gorkha*) (Artley 1980: 7). Workshops had been established within the palace grounds before 1968 and Newar craftsmen were called upon to assist the team from London. On Mahendra's request, the most senior of craftsmen, were issued with certificates recording their work on the project. Several established their own businesses on the basis of their work on the palace interiors with Asprey.<sup>54</sup> Once the Palace was in use, and the interiors of the palace were published, in the official English-language guidebook to the Palace, *Narayanhiti Royal Palace: Home of the king of Nepal* (Anonymous 1976), the text juxtaposed alongside photographs of the palace and its interiors emphasized the indigenous character of the design. For example, images of each of the state interiors are paired with captions that highlight their symbolic aspects; the rhododendron pattern in a pair of curtains, the wood carving of Nepalese craftsmen, or the use of local materials such as marble from Godavari. The guide does not mention Asprey of London, it omits any mention of the origin and design of the building, but picks out those aspects contributed to by Nepali craftsmen and artists. This highlights multiple identity-making practices at play and parallels with the process of representing the exterior.

### **The palace as a symbol of office**

Drawing parallels between the Nepal's 1962 constitution, and the design of the royal palace, Malagodi concluded that both articulated 'the *raison d'être* of the Panchayat regime: a modern political endeavour cloaked in a traditionalist guise' (Malagodi 2015: 75). Adopting the metaphor of the cloak, in order to conceptualize the inter-relationship between interior and exterior. I highlight the way in which Mahendra deliberately brought the palace into play as a symbol of office, by and through the inscription of an official national narrative around the exterior of the building that served to conceal its interior.

By 1962, in order to create a distance between the Shah monarchy and the Rana regime, Mahendra had constructed Rana rule, and the luxury associated with the vast Rana palace buildings and their lavish state rooms overflowing with British and European paintings, décor and furnishings, as practices that expressed indulgence in built form. These practices were portrayed as immoral, deemed distasteful, and the palaces were left to decay, a narrative that still informs the treatment of these buildings today (Weise 2012). Yet, Asprey's designs were commissioned by the king, I suggest, precisely because they were inextricably tied to their identity as goods representative of modern luxury. The way in which the palace was brought into service as a symbol of office

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<sup>53</sup> For example, office desk by Gordon Russell. Design number: X9765-71. Gordon Russell Museum.

<sup>54</sup> For example, woodcarver Motiram Tamrakar. engineer Shankar Nath Rimal (Kathmandu, 06 April 2012).

does not demonstrate that there was no continuity between the Rana and Shah regimes, but that such continuities were not politically palatable.

The palace building itself was a luxury, a large-scale, expensive<sup>55</sup> project that physically manifested the power of the monarch, through large-scale destruction in the heart of the city, and in a very real way mediated the space around it. The king's complete control over the public sphere makes it almost impossible to track down any contemporary criticism of the palace, though oblique references can be found. For example, Benjamin Polk referred to the possibility of such opinions when he stated 'I make no apology to those who think these expensive public symbols are out of place when people are in poverty' (1985: 94), and Edward Asprey recalled the king's response to criticism of the palace being completed to a lavish standard:

'whether he wanted to appear less extravagant or this was forced upon him by circumstance, I can't be sure. But there is no doubt in my mind that Mahendra was disillusioned [with the palace], wasn't wild about living there and felt it had gone slightly over the top'.<sup>56</sup>

Shanker Nath Rimal, who worked in close proximity to the king during the construction process remembers Mahendra's change of heart part-way through the project. Rimal recalled a conversation with Mahendra about the facing material for the building (a choice between marble – as specified by Polk, which would have had to come from the Carrara quarry outside Rome – or brick). Mahendra is said to have stated wearily 'even if I build the Tajmahal, the Nepalese people might not appreciate my work'.<sup>57</sup> The king selected so-called Chinese brick and his choice of a traditional material in this context could have been intended to provide the building (and its apparently lavish interiors) with a cloak of modesty.<sup>58</sup>

The wedding rituals of the then Crown Prince Birendra and Aishwarya both began and ended at the palace, representing its launch as a representation of the nation and the official home of the Shah king.<sup>59</sup> In spite of the explicit identification of the kingship with the nation discussed above,<sup>60</sup> Mahendra realised the danger of projecting the nation as belonging to the monarch, and Burghart's analysis of Mahendra's speeches given across the country during the 1960s reveal the application of the *vaishnavite* concept of service to one's deity to national service (*desa seva*) (Burghart 1996: 256-

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<sup>55</sup> Shanker Nath Rimal recalled the overall budget to have been of the value of 8-9 crore rupees (excluding the interiors). S.N. Rimal, Kathmandu, 6 April 2012.

<sup>56</sup> Interview with Edward Asprey, 4 January 2013.

<sup>57</sup> Shanker Nath Rimal, Kathmandu, 6 April 2012.

<sup>58</sup> The meaning of these bricks is nuanced, as they came from modern brick factories. They were known as Chinese, after the first modern kiln established with Chinese support in Harisiddhi in the mid-1960s.

<sup>59</sup> The building was also the official home of the royal family on the occasion of various religious rituals connected to the monarch's role as head of state, for example the giving of *tika* to various high-ranking officials in the *Dhanusha* room on the occasion of Vijaya Dashami, the sacred thread ceremony of the crown prince, and the wedding of Princess Shruti. See Mocko (2012: 409 onwards) for a detailed discussion of the royal *Dasain* rituals.

<sup>60</sup> In certain aspects of administrative organisation from 1951. As an example, he gives the position held by the Shah kings and later the Rana prime ministers at the apex of the tenorial hierarchy which meant that the ruler as recipient of all state revenue could decide how to disburse funds, either for governmental or personal expenditure. After 1951, a fiscal policy was introduced that predicted the annual costs of government and adjusted taxation accordingly. The king and the royal family received a salary from the state and unlike during the pre-1950 period, any surplus was now accrued to the state rather than the king (Burghart 1996: 256).

8).<sup>61</sup> Mahendra projected himself as working alongside the state in the service of the nation, and his actions in the late 1960s and early 1970s suggest a deliberate (re-)positioning of the palace to enable it to be brought into service as an effective symbol of office, rather than a luxurious royal home.<sup>62</sup>

The rooms in the palace were named after the 75 districts of Nepal, making it a three-dimensional map of the nation-state over which Mahendra reigned. Mahendra is also said to have sold the palace to the people in 1972. By portraying the building as the property of the people gifted by the king, and as a representation of a unified nation, against a reality of both resistance and ethnic diversity, Mahendra was able to position himself with the people as a devotee of the nation-state and to legitimize his position. The palace became officially interpreted as a symbol of office alongside the crown and sceptre, and its form served to naturalize the position of the monarchy at the head of the political order with its 'ultimate Nepaleseness' (Onta 1996) designed to promote a national culture.

### **The palace as an instrument of foreign policy**

'A modern form of His Majesty's concern for the welfare of his subjects and international friendship. Perhaps this is the best message and most fitting symbolism of the Narayanhiti Palace' (Anonymous 1976: 14). This quotation from the official English language palace guidebook to the palace reveals that the official interpretation of the palace as a symbol of office was also intended for use internationally. Mahendra, as absolute monarch, positioned himself as the bridge between the traditional world of Nepal and the modern west (Lakier 2009: 212). The country was opening up for the first time, seeking international recognition as an independent state as well as support through aid packages.<sup>63</sup> The Narayanhiti Palace was designed for the receiving of foreign royal and diplomatic guests. Nepal established political relations with a large number of countries including the US, USSR and China, who all set up embassies in Kathmandu between 1958-1960.<sup>64</sup> State guests resided in the palace and each state visit followed a set programme, which involved a significant number of events within the space of the palace, including the exchange of speeches between the king and the visiting Head of State; official receptions; the signing of the visitors book, and receiving the credentials of foreign diplomats. The design of the palace interiors by a British firm can also be explored in the context of this international audience.

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<sup>61</sup> Burghart argues that in the application of the concept of service to one's deity to national service (*desa seva*), Mahendra utilised concepts from Vaishnavite devotional religion in order to translate the values and ideas of nation-building into the Nepali political arena.

<sup>62</sup> According to Shanker Nath Rimal, Mahendra publicly distanced himself from the palace by deciding to reside elsewhere; this was reflected in his request to change the layout of the private rooms on the south-side, reducing the size of the bedroom. This was echoed by Edward Asprey who recalled that his father was disappointed that the palace was not used more, that Mahendra was not comfortable there and that he resided in his own villa.

<sup>63</sup> Acharya shows a steady increase in foreign aid as a percentage of development expenditure from the first Five-Year Plan (1956-1961) through the Fourth Plan (1970-1975) (Acharya 1992: 9). This then increased exponentially from the mid 1970s to 1990, and by 1997 more than half of the government's budget came from foreign aid.

<sup>64</sup> Official photographs on display in the Palace Museum reveal 20 official state visits by heads of state between 1971 and 2001.

The Panchayat regime was concerned with the appearance of order and unity, and though the interiors of the palace were publicized, this was done in an official English-language guidebook to the Palace, clearly intended for foreign guests to the building:<sup>65</sup>

‘In a fine clear morning in autumn, with the never-ending play of sunlight over the snow-peaks, and the silhouette of the mists still lingering over the hills, it looks as though the Palace had stood there for an age. Its beauty, however, is new and fresh.’ (Anonymous 1976: 5).

The decision to describe the Palace in the context of Nepal’s unique topography, emphasizes that continuity was intended to highlight Nepal’s individuality and pride. The Nepali historian Pratyoush Onta’s discussion of the Panchayat manipulation of historical consciousness is demonstrative of how this history was intended to cultivate a national culture and create an independent land on which development (*bikas*) could be enacted (Onta 1996: 232). The use of tradition as a way of restoring Nepal’s international reputation reveals an awareness within the palace of Nepal’s marginal position on the global stage.

Architecture is a way of scripting a performance, and the Narayanhiti Palace can be viewed as a staging-ground in which each room formed the stage for a specific activity. As a symbol of office, I suggest the entire building was conceptualized as public space and was therefore called upon in pursuit of international recognition. Foreign guests were intended to come away with an impression of simultaneously seeing the value in offering support to a country with a distinctive national identity and have confidence in the monarchy’s ability to bring development to the country, i.e. at the king’s official home, to experience a luxurious (modern) environment with which they were familiar. In this sense, the palace interiors formed an active part of Mahendra’s foreign policy. An account by M. Casey (the wife of a former Australian Governor-General) on the occasion of the wedding of King Birendra to Aishwarya in 1970 offers us the chance to experience a performance in action:

‘The King’s banquet, the last of the official ceremonies, was held in the new palace. You entered from the road up a long long flight of wide stone steps carpeted in red or more adroitly by means of an Otis lift near a side entrance. For an hour and a half the many guests stood on a honey-coloured marble floor... Finally we moved into the banqueting hall, another long high narrow room made lively by mirrors, candelabra, armchairs of crystal with seats of gentian blue, and by jewelled women. At the far end rose a mural of the impeccable peak of Everest, the summit of the world... How can one assess the impressions taken away from this visit by the many disparate guests? It was an opportunity for informal talks; you could see unexpected fish swimming towards each other...’<sup>66</sup>

The official guide to the events of the wedding includes photographs of the tents set up in the palace grounds to host the official guests, including various heads of states and foreign diplomats (Simha 1971-2). Interestingly, Casey’s account does not privilege representation nor spatial structure, they operate together. She picks out particular material items of note, the lift as an example of modern technology which she was perhaps surprised to see in Nepal, the marble floor of the *Kaski Baithak* and the painting of Everest at the far end of the *Lamjung* dining room, as well as the way in which the informal arrangement of the dining room

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<sup>65</sup> References are to the third edition of 1976. Images in the front of the booklet show the palace alongside other symbols of office.

<sup>66</sup> Casey, M. 1970. ‘An Auspicious Occasion: 25<sup>th</sup> February to 4<sup>th</sup> March 1970’. Unpublished Manuscript. Kent History Centre ref: CKS-U951/Z81/5.

facilitated the discussion of politicians (the unexpected fish mentioned by Casey) from all countries in support of Mahendra's policy of non-alignment.

### **The palace interior**

The Rana palace complex at Narayanhiti was built as a small citadel, surrounded by walls designed to create separation between the rulers and the ruled. As stated above, for those living and working within the palace, the space inside the walls was described as *bhitra* (inside), a feudal concept of space that offered 'security, authority and protection' (Rana 1986: 90). This separation continued after 1951 and access to the main palace building was extremely restricted, even to palace staff.<sup>67</sup> Selected members of the public were granted the opportunity to enter the palace grounds to receive *tika* from the king at the annual festival of *Dasain*, but did not enter the main building. Politicians, civil leaders, and on occasion foreign diplomats were usually granted audiences with the king in a separate one-story building to the south west of the main palace called *Mangal Sadhan*.<sup>68</sup> Therefore, whilst the main reception room (*Kaski Baithak*) was familiar to literate Nepalis in a mediated form –via photographs distributed through the state-sponsored press to commemorate visits by foreign Heads of State, the conferring of medals on other members of the royal family, and the swearing in of government officials by the king– very few people entered the interior of the palace, and those who did were either foreign guests or members of the Nepali educated elite.

The Rana rulers dressed in British clothes, drove British motorcars, and built neoclassical palaces illuminated with electric light.<sup>69</sup> A series of sumptuary laws tightly controlled access to these imported goods<sup>70</sup> and the architectural landscape around the palaces, with rules dictating the specific types of housing each caste could construct (Gellner: 1995). Leichthy argues that “Nepal” was not dependent on the British, but the Rana regime was’ (1997: 133). Using strategies manifested in material terms they used British goods in order to position themselves as those with the right to rule. Mahendra's use of British designs and material goods within the palace reveals notions of identity creation that maintained a direct link to Britain as the source of political modernisation and legitimation in a continuation of the identity practices of the Ranas.<sup>71</sup> With this reading, Mahendra's adoption of British material culture becomes in itself a signal of political allegiance, literally transcribed here as designs by a British firm for some of the most important interior spaces in the country.

Whereas the Ranas used British goods as part of a series of strategies of visual distinction (Leichthy 1997) that prioritized being seen, the interiors of the Narayanhiti Palace were not intended to be seen by the majority of the population of Nepal. They were designed to be seen and experienced only by the Nepali elite attending state events staged in the palace, together with foreign guests. Alongside the complete control of state media, it was precisely the inaccessibility of the palace interiors that made it possible for Mahendra to commission

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<sup>67</sup> As was emphasized by my interviews with ex-members of palace staff, who all recall their first entrance into the building – often surreptitiously, or post-2008 when the king had already left. Members of staff would carry passes, which enabled various levels of access. The highest level granted access to the private wing of the main palace building as emphasized by the unofficial guidebook to the Palace Museum written by former palace official Buddhi Bahadur Gurung.

<sup>68</sup> Official meetings sometimes took place in designated rooms on the ground floor of the main palace building.

<sup>69</sup> A number of photos extant of porters carrying cars later became potent images of the exploitative nature of the Rana regime.

<sup>70</sup> To the extent that a non-Rana could be severely punished for owning a radio (Koirala 2008: 32–33).

<sup>71</sup> Mahendra followed in a line of Nepali rulers who emulated foreign elites in order to uphold their position (see Gellner 1999: 7-9). The early Shah kings, who inhabited Malla palaces and attempted to distance themselves from the British and Mughals, were in this sense the exception to the rule of imitating foreign rulers.

British designs at a time when official rhetoric required the Rana palaces to be reviled for their ostentatious display of wealth and foreignness. The make-up of the Nepali political elite changed little with the transition from Rana to Shah rule in 1951, hence Mahendra's concern for those Nepalis attending state events at the palace, would have been less the re-invention of tradition, as in the official guidebook, but rather to uphold the prestige requirement of the Shah royal family. These visitors to the palace were influenced by the tastes of the Rana (Leichty 2003: 44-45) and the British-designed interiors would have been understood by them as both modern and luxurious.

## Conclusion

By considering the palace at a particular moment during its construction in the 1960s and the first few years of its operation, this paper has shown the complexities of the plurality of meanings of the palace at the time of its construction and launch, meanings that were under constant renegotiation.<sup>72</sup> The palace was the centre of political authority at the time of its construction. As such, all traces of the Rana legacy had to be seen to be erased. An official narrative was inscribed around the exterior of the palace that played up tradition in order to legitimize the political authority and nationalist stature of the monarchy to a local audience. In this way, Mahendra called the new palace into service as a new symbol of office. The traditional elements of the form of the palace's exterior and its materiality were also emphasized to signal the country's uniqueness and independence, and to dress a stage upon which international relations were played out. The palace's state interiors on the other hand, drew upon British and European designs and were intended to simultaneously uphold the position of the royal family within the ruling Nepali elite, and to indicate the country's ability to enact development to foreign guests.

The official narrative inscribed around the exterior of the palace, has been explored using the metaphor of a cloak. This metaphor was invoked by Malagodi to encapsulate an apparent contradiction between the steel frame and concrete building that reclaimed Newar architectural forms, and it was claimed as a mode by which to explore the relationship between interior and exterior of the palace (Magalodi 2015: 75). Firstly, the cloak did not envelop the interior through the architectural use of Newar architectural forms per se. Rather, its coverage was determined through the way in which its intended meaning was projected (or not) and access to the palace was controlled. It attempted to define how Nepalis were to coalesce around a single Nepalese identity, i.e. how they were to view the palace from the outside, in direct contrast to the Rana palaces. The adoption of a view from the aristocratic inside (*bhitra*) has enabled us to see through the weft and the weave of this cloak to reveal a continuation of the identity-building practices of the Rana regime. Practices that at the very least demonstrate a continuation of the meaning of British and European goods between the Rana and Shah, and that when pushed suggest that the make-up of the state apparatus was little changed in its elite nature.<sup>73</sup> In order to uphold his rule, Mahendra publicly constructed the Rana regime as exploitative and as a result the display of foreign goods became associated with the abuse of power. The fact that Mahendra chose to use a British firm to design the palace interiors reveals the cloak as a carefully woven reality that thinly veiled a

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<sup>72</sup>The legitimization of these multiple interpretations is important because it highlights the importance of understanding the palace within its local context and challenges the culturally constructed oppositions of modern and traditional that have thus far framed the way the palace has been understood.

<sup>73</sup> In the peer review of this article, it was pointed out that Hem Narayan Agrawal's *Nepal. A study in constitutional change* identified much in common between Mahendra's 1962 constitution had and the first written constitutional attempt under Padma Shamsher Rana in 1948. For a consideration of the relationship between Nepal's constitutions and the architecture of power, see Malagodi (201).

relatively unchanged Nepali elite, for whom legitimate authority remained linked to an image of foreignness – read Britishness.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the Narayanhiti Palace was actively used to construct patterns for self-interpretation, legitimized by the past. These patterns differed according to whether the audience experienced the interior of the palace through their participation in key ceremonies, or not; according to nationality, and/or status. The palace was used by Mahendra to seek legitimacy through the will of the people of Nepal, yet its bounded compound, simultaneously excluded all but the elite from the inner workings of the government. This exclusion was challenged in 1990, again in 2006 and finally ended in 2009, when the palace was opened to the public as a national museum.

### **Final note**

This paper formed part of the bicentenary workshop of Nepal–Britain relations organised by the Britain-Nepal Academic Council on 23 March 2015. After presenting my paper, Mark Watson from the Royal Botanical Garden Edinburgh was kind enough to share with me an image of a map drawn by Major Charles Crawford, in the collection at the Linnean Society. This map arguably locates the position of the British residency in the early 1800s at Narayanhiti. Therefore, one can argue that the first Rana residences were constructed there in order to be in close proximity to the British. The location of the British residency was possibly the ultimate reason why the Nepali monarch in the 1960s was to construct his palace at this particular site.

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