

# NEPAL'S CAPITAL KATHMANDU REBUILDING ITS WORLD HERITAGE



The devastating earthquake of 2015 seriously damaged many temples and palaces of the Kathmandu valley in Nepal. Rebuilding works are slowing down, because Nepal and UNESCO have different views of the historical authenticity of the world heritage.

The temple where hippies loved to sing their Hare Krishna songs does not exist anymore. Only the stepped base of the Maju Dega has remained. At other temples, support beams are clamped in the brick walls.

The roof of the massive Taleju with its three-story pagoda is scaffolded. **At the Tribhuvan Museum, the white plaster peels off, on the canopy grass and bushes proliferate.** No one has dared to go up since the big quake.

It was 11:56 when the earth shook on April 25, 2015 in Kathmandu. The seismographs showed the value of 7.8 on the Richter scale. The after-shock on May 12 was hardly weaker. Two years later, the Royal Durbar Square still bears the scars of the catastrophe. And they will be there for a long time.

“After the earthquake we estimated that the reconstruction will take ten years,” says Christian Manhart. “But it will take much longer.” Manhart leads the UNESCO office in Nepal’s capital Kathmandu.

## **Less Than Ten Percent Restored**

More than 750 historic buildings were damaged by the earthquake, 135 were completely destroyed. So far, less than ten percent have been restored, says Manhart. “The rubble is cleared away, the pyramids of the temples are still standing, but the superstructure and all the decorations are missing.”

However, the money is missing. The world community promised more than \$4 billion aid to help Nepal. In the old town there are huge signs with names of supporters. At the neoclassical Gaddi Baithak, where the king was once crowned, the US flag is emblazoned. The Americans promise to restore the palace behind white columns “in its former splendor”.

The Chinese oppose with Nasal Chowk with a whole series of boards in the royal courtyard. With blueprints and illustrations, they show how they want to rebuild the nine-story Basantapur tower and reassemble its saloon balconies made of centuries-old fragments.

## **Better to Rebuild**

“Build back better” was the somewhat broad-legged slogan that Nepal’s government issued after the disaster. But it is not that easy, just because of the bureaucracy. Archaeologists must publicly advertise projects in Nepal and always choose the cheapest provider, explains Manhart, even if the company has no experience with temples and palaces. Subsequently, the cheapest carvers and stonemasons are hired.

The choice of bricks is also tricky. The historic buildings require special bricks that can only be fired in dry winter. Therefore, you have to order one year in advance. Some builders find it too expensive. "Some just want to put historic facades on a modern core, but that would be against the Venice Charter," explains Manhart. And short-sighted. For the old-style brick buildings with toothed wooden beams could resonate in quakes. The builders knew what they were doing.

### **Concrete and Cement Instead of Historic Materials**

In March 2016, Nepal's government decided that reconstructions would include historical materials and construction techniques. Manhart watches over the principle with eagle eyes. "I've already closed some construction sites because they worked with concrete and cement," he says. His aim is to save the places on the World Heritage List.

Seven World Heritage sites are located in the Kathmandu Valley. In 2016 UNESCO included four temples and three palaces in their list. The tourists would, of course, come and see them, even if they were no longer part of the World Heritage.

"But it's about prestige," says Manhart. A government that loses World Heritage status would be eternally criticized."

However, UNESCO does not want to be a stubborn principle rider. This can be seen on the stupa of Bodnath, the largest Buddhist sanctuary in Nepal. The cracks in the dome base have long been filled, radiating snow-white as ever. And above the painted-up eyes of the Buddha, the 13 golden steps shine again to enlightenment. **When the earth shook, the top three broke off. It was decided that the whole tower structure was to be replaced,** stabilized by four steel beams inside. UNESCO did not intervene.

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