

COURSE CORRECTING POWER OF SURVEILLANCE AND SOCIAL ACTIVISM IN THE HERITAGE RESTORATION PROCESS: A CASE STUDY OF RANI POKHARI, KATHMANDU METROPOLITAN CITY

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Abstract

Disasters trigger citizens' emotions to protect lives and safeguard cultural assets. Citizens often move rapidly to support their neighbors and pay close attention to how their communities are rebuilt and how heritage is restored. This research uses content analysis to demonstrate how community surveillance and social activism play key roles in preventing heritage restoration agencies from going off track and compromising heritage values. It presents the Ranipokhari (Queen's Pond) post-earthquake restoration case from Kathmandu Metropolitan City (KMC) to answer the research question. The findings reveal that surveillance, in concert with social activism, exposed mistakes and negligence by the pond restoration agencies, brought them back on track, and corrected temple restoration errors committed in the past.

Keywords: Social activism; Resilience; Heritage restoration; Correcting planning failures; Earthquake damage reconstruction, Surveillance.

1. Introduction

Post-disaster restoration authorities often prefer quick and convenient solutions even when such approaches compromise heritage values (UNESCO, 2016). The use of concrete, steel, and modern construction technologies frequently becomes the default norm after disasters (Republica / MyRepublica, 2016–2019). However, local activism has increasingly resisted such tendencies, particularly when reconstruction risks erasing traditional forms and cultural meaning (Tiwari, 2017). Disaster-triggered civic emotions often motivate citizens to protect lives and restore damaged heritage precincts (Aldrich, 2017). Citizens frequently monitor reconstruction processes and raise their voices to ensure that heritage values in historic sites are safeguarded (The Kathmandu Post, 2016–2020).

This study uses content analysis to show how social activism corrected the planning trajectory of the Queen

Pond restoration in KMC by pressuring authorities to uphold heritage norms (author's analysis). The article presents a detailed case study of the pond, documenting the reconstruction process and the associated activism aimed at correcting the course of heritage planning and restoration. These insights are intended for heritage activists globally who seek to monitor and protect heritage values (UNESCO, 2016).

How did community surveillance and social activism keep KMC's Queen's Pond restoration on track?

2. Literature Review

Surveillance and Social Activism as a Means of Course-Correcting heritage norms

2.1. Surveillance

Scholars such as Reilly (2023) have framed surveillance as a political practice, arguing that it allows citizens to "watch the watchers" and hold authorities accountable, thereby redistributing observational power in ways that enhance transparency and democratic engagement. Surveillance is observation from below, or monitoring

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conducted by ordinary citizens rather than by institutional actors. By enabling citizens to document public events, institutional actions, or social occurrences, surveillance challenges the monopolization of information by powerful entities and introduces alternative narratives into public discourse. Nevertheless, research indicates that surveillance functions not only as a technical practice but also as a social and political phenomenon, reflecting the evolving relationship between individuals, technology, and authority. Practically, surveillance has become increasingly relevant with the widespread use of smartphones, body cameras, and wearable recording devices (Mann et al., 2003). Ordinary citizens now frequently document interactions with law enforcement, corporate actors, or public institutions, generating evidence that can challenge official accounts and increase transparency (Department of Archaeology (DoA), 2017). Beyond legal or political accountability, surveillance has been applied in activist and grassroots contexts, enabling communities to monitor environmental conditions, government actions, or institutional practices. Such practices demonstrate how citizen-led observation can function as a form of social resistance and participatory research, revealing dynamics that might otherwise remain hidden. Surveillance, empowers citizens to document and contest official narratives, and fosters new forms of civic engagement and accountability.

2.2. Social Activism

Social activism is also deeply connected to questions of ethics, justice, and power. It refers to the deliberate effort by individuals or groups to promote, impede, or direct social, political, economic, or environmental change. Activists engage in a wide range of strategies, including protests, petitions, awareness campaigns, community organizing, lobbying, and digital advocacy. The core purpose of social activism is to mobilize public attention, influence policy decisions, and bring about social transformation through collective action. Scholars note that successful activism often combines grassroots organization, public visibility, and strategic engagement with political institutions. These elements enable movements to sustain momentum, negotiate with authorities, and influence broader public opinion. By raising awareness, challenging norms, and holding authorities accountable, social activism functions as a mechanism for civic education and societal reflection. Furthermore, activism can empower marginalized communities, giving voice to groups that might otherwise remain unheard, and fostering solidarity across diverse social and cultural contexts.

3. Case Study of Ranipokhari

The 2015 earthquake severely damaged Queen's Pond structures and the Balgopaleswar Temple at its

center (National Reconstruction Authority, 2016–2021). Kathmandu Metropolitan City responded by taking responsibility for designing, planning, and overseeing the reconstruction (Kathmandu Metropolitan City, 2016–2018). President Bidya Devi Bhandari laid the foundation stone of the temple in January 2016 (The Himalayan Times, 2016–2019). The KMC awarded the reconstruction contract to Worldwide Kandel KN KG JV for Rs 62.9 million (Kathmandu Metropolitan City, 2016–2018). Construction commenced in April 2016, but early rebuilding activities showed little concern for heritage conservation standards (Republica / MyRepublica, 2016–2019).

Without consulting local residents, KMC drained the pond's water using pumps in May 2016 (The Kathmandu Post, 2016–2020). This unilateral act generated significant public resentment, as locals regarded the pond as a sacred cultural space rather than merely a water body (Republica / MyRepublica, 2016–2019). The lack of transparency and absence of public engagement heightened fears that the pond's historical integrity could be permanently damaged (The Himalayan Times, 2016–2019). On August 23, 2016, residents observed that the tarpaulin color on the site had changed from orange (sensitive construction area) to blue (general construction area) (Republica / MyRepublica, 2016–2019).



(a) People working at under-construction Balgopaleswor temple



(b) Erection of cement pillar

Figure 1: Status of Ranipokhari

They discovered the erection of cement pillars (Figure 1) inside the temple foundation and the use of excavators in the pond bed—practices that violated heritage norms (Department of Archaeology, 2016–2017). Public outrage escalated rapidly, and the news circulated widely on social media (The Kathmandu Post, 2016–2020). Activists, planners, architects, and local residents formed a human chain around Ranipokhari on August 24, 2016, to protest KMC's anti-heritage construction practices (Republica / MyRepublica, 2016–2019).

Public pressure (Figure 2) compelled the Department of Archaeology to halt the reconstruction, citing heritage violations (Department of Archaeology, 2016–2017). UNESCO subsequently issued concerns regarding



Figure 2: Public demonstration for pressure



Figure 4: Kathmandu Mayor Bidya Sundar Shakya speaks with journalists at Ranipokhari, on Tuesday, December 26, 2017.

inappropriate restoration methods (UNESCO, 2016). Responsibility for the temple reconstruction was formally transferred to DOA on October 22, 2016, after negotiations among DOA, KMC, and the NRA (National Reconstruction Authority, 2016–2021).

Despite the handover, KMC continued other reconstruction activities and announced plans to convert Ranipokhari into a recreational zone with amusement features and commercial amenities (Kathmandu Metropolitan City, 2016–2018). The proposal (Figure 3) included an amusement park, cafés, boating facilities, and entry fees—plans that conflicted with the Ancient Monument Preservation Act (Government of Nepal, 2013, 2018, 2019). KMC also attempted to convert the naturally recharging pond into a concrete-lined “swimming pool,” constructing a concrete retaining wall up to 10 feet high (The Kathmandu Post, 2016–2020).



Figure 3: Proposed and under-construction status. Photo: Myrepublica Daily

Conservationists noted that such construction methods contradicted traditional pond-building techniques, which used black clay (kalimati), stone, mud, brick dust, lime, and caramel mixtures (Tuladhar, 2017). These methods were followed in historic ponds such as Kamal Pokhari, Pimbahal Pokhari, and Siddhi Pokhari (Tiwari, 2017). The use of cement in an ancient pond was therefore widely criticized as violating conservation principles (Tuladhar, 2017). Widespread public anger led local residents, historians, and activists to lock the gate of the pond in protest (The Himalayan Times, 2016–2019).

This forced the mayor to confront the activists, after

which DOA ordered KMC to halt construction on December 27, 2017 (Department of Archaeology (DoA), 2017). The next day, KMC withdrew from the reconstruction following a meeting led by the mayor (Figure 4), deputy mayor, NRA representatives, and DOA officials (Republica / MyRepublica, 2016–2019). An expert panel of 11 members—including Sudarshan Raj Tiwari, Rohit Ranjitkar, and Prem Nath Maskey—was formed to redesign the reconstruction plan using traditional techniques (Department of Archaeology (DoA), 2017).

The expert committee recommended:

1. Exclusive use of traditional burnt-clay bricks and black cotton soil;
 2. Removal of earlier concrete and steel;
 3. Demolition of anti-heritage structures;
 4. Replacement of the dome roof with the original Shikhara-style temple roof;
 5. Natural replenishment of pond water;
 6. Cancellation of commercial amenities;
 7. Prohibition of commercial use of heritage sites
- Department of Archaeology (DoA) (2017).

KMC's inability to act on these recommendations created further public frustration. In March 2018, 30 activists filed a police complaint against officials involved in violating heritage norms (The Kathmandu Post, 2016–2020). Continued activism led the government to order demolition of concrete structures on April 5, 2018 (Government of Nepal, 2013, 2018, 2019). When KMC resisted implementation, sustained public pressure forced it to terminate the contractor on April 21, 2018, incurring financial losses (Republica / MyRepublica, 2016–2019). Activists simultaneously filed Right to Information applications seeking detailed project data (RTI Nepal, 2018). They also organized symbolic protests and weekly cleaning drives at the pond (The Kathmandu Post, 2016–2020). These actions compelled KMC to begin

removing the concrete walls on June 23, 2018 (Republica / MyRepublica, 2016–2019). A new tender for Rs 150 million was announced but failed due to non-qualified applicants, causing further delays (Kathmandu Metropolitan City, 2016–2018). Public frustration peaked in January 2019, as evidenced by symbolic protests such as a football match (Figure 5) on the dried pond bed (The Himalayan Times, 2016–2019).



Figure 5: Football playing at Ranipokhari, Photo: Setopati

On January 28, 2019, the Cabinet transferred pond reconstruction responsibilities to the NRA and temple reconstruction to DOA (Government of Nepal, 2013, 2018, 2019). Due to insufficient progress, the temple task was again transferred to the NRA in March (National Reconstruction Authority, 2016–2021). A Monitoring and Coordination Committee led by Dr. C.B. Shrestha was formed (Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation (MOCTCA), 2019). A major unresolved issue involved selecting between the Gumbaz roof and the original Granthakut style. Conservationists and locals advocated for the Granthakut form based on historical evidence (Tiwari, 2017). After consultations, the authorities approved restoration in the original Granthakut style ((Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation (MOCTCA), 2019). The NRA employed artisans from Bhaktapur and Kathmandu and formed a users' committee led by Ajay Ratna Sthapit in March 2019 (National Reconstruction Authority, 2016–2021). Workers applied traditional methods—clearing vegetation, leveling the floor, and lining the pond with impermeable black clay sourced from Sankhu and Bhaktapur (Republica / MyRepublica, 2016–2019). The embankment walls (Fig. 6 and 7) were built using traditional bricks and lime-brick dust mortar (The Kathmandu Post, 2016–2020).

In July 2020, the NRA attempted pumping borewell water into the pond, triggering objections from activists and hydrologists (Nepali Times, 2020). Following consultations, the NRA halted borewell use and secured water from the Melamchi Water Supply Project, filling the pond with 57 million liters on September 20, 2020 (The Kathmandu Post, 2016–2020). Finally, the President



Figure 6: Construction of embankment wall



Figure 7: The pond spreads over 63 ropanis of land

inaugurated the restored pond on October 21, 2020, and the NRA handed over it to KMC on December 23, 2021 (National Reconstruction Authority, 2016–2021).

Public pressure and activism forced KMC to act on the heritage restoration of the pond, despite initial resistance. However, bureaucratic delays, shifting responsibilities between agencies, and failed tenders caused significant setbacks, leading to public frustration throughout the process.

4. Results: Surveillance and Social Activism

Surveillance began when residents noticed changes in the tarpaulin covering the pond site in August 2016 and conducted on-site inspections, uncovering cement pillars in the temple and mechanized excavation of the pond. Citizens documented these violations through photographs and videos, which were rapidly circulated on social media, transforming localized observations into nationally visible evidence. The local activists also figured out that the concrete sidewalls were erected for embankment against the heritage norms. The pond's floors were recklessly excavated by excavators to laydown concrete tiles. They circulated this news online to call people to come and protest. Regarding the anti-heritage reconstruction act of the KMC and its plan to make the pond recreational modern park, local people filed police complaints against responsible officials.

Table 1: Surveillance and social activism actions in Ranipokhari reconstruction

Surveillance	Social Activism
Residents noticed changes in the tarpaulin covering the pond and began informal on-site inspections.	Formation of a human chain protest against the use of concrete.
Citizens uncovered cement pillars inside the temple and use of excavators for digging the pond against heritage norms.	Protesters locked the pond gates to pressure Kathmandu Metropolitan City (KMC) to halt reckless construction activities.
Local activists photographed and recorded the use of reinforced concrete sidewalls via social media.	Sustained protests forced KMC to stop construction and eventually dismantle all concrete works.
Activists exposed KMC's plans to convert the heritage pond into a modern recreational park and swimming pool.	Activism successfully stopped the KMC's user-pay recreational park and swimming pool idea.
Citizens filed police complaints against anti-heritage reconstruction actions by KMC.	Activists presented pond-grass to the Deputy Mayor as a protest against construction delays.
Hydrologists and activists exposed the use of borewells to fill the pond.	Public pressure forced authorities to stop borewell use
Local people researched and found that Granthakut style roof was the original form.	Activists pressured authorities to abandon the Gumbaz-style roof and adopt the Granthakut style.
Local and national media amplified violations through continuous news coverage.	Students organized symbolic actions, such as football matches on the dried pond, to dramatize institutional failure.
Continuous monitoring revealed incapability of KMC and Department of Archaeology (DOA) in managing the project.	The revealed incapability shifted reconstruction responsibility from KMC and DOA to the National Reconstruction Authority (NRA).

Hydrologists and activists also disseminated the act of use of bore well to pump water into the pond that forced the NRA to stop and bring water from outside source from the Melamchi supply lines. The local people also figured out that the KMC and DOA were trying to put the Gumbaz (dome) style roof on the temple, against the original Malla era Granthakut style. Many local news media ran news campaign about the wrongdoing in the pond reconstruction.

The act of Surveillance trigger social activism. The documentation and dissemination of concrete use in the temple and the pond premises united people to form human chain as a protest against the concrete use. They locked the pond gate to pressure KMC to refrain from the reckless construction. Finally, the activists were successful in stopping KMC from reckless concrete construction in the pond. The KMC was forced to dismantle all the concrete work in the pond. Not only that but they also stopped KMC's idea of creating user pay modern swimming pool and recreation park. Regarding the construction delays, some activists collected the pond grass and presented them to the deputy mayor as a protest. Students organized football match on the dried pond as a symbolic protest. Such protests and pressures proved DOA and KMC incapable of doing the task and the protest help to shift the KMC and DOA responsibility to the NRA. Next, activists pressured the agencies to opt for original Granthakut style roof of the temple rather than the Rana period Gumbaz style. The hydrologists and activist's objection against bore well rallied

people to oppose the use of bore well and finally it was stopped.

5. Conclusion

Surveillance allowed citizens to detect technical and cultural violations—such as the use of reinforced concrete, mechanized excavation, bore well water extraction, and inappropriate architectural alterations—at an early stage, even when access to the site was restricted. Through systematic documentation and dissemination via social and mainstream media, localized observations were transformed into credible, publicly visible evidence that challenged official narratives and exposed institutional shortcomings.

Surveillance supplied plenty of resources to trigger social activism for correcting the pond reconstruction course. The triggered social activism not only halted inappropriate construction practices but also compelled authorities to dismantle completed concrete works, abandon plans for a modern recreational park, stop the use of bore well water, and finally restore the temple's Granthakut roof form. Activism exposed institutional weaknesses of KMC and DOA that led to the transfer of responsibility to the National Reconstruction Authority, a resourceful national body for implementation. Surveillance in concert with social activism pinpointed the mistakes and negligence of the pond restoration agencies, brought them back on track, and corrected the mistakes of the past.

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