
Manohara Durbar: Historical Significance, Heritage Vulnerability and Conservation Challenges in Kageshwori Manohara Municipality

Sudeep Gartaula

Faculty Member, Koteshwor Multiple Campus

sudeep.gartaula@koteshworcampus.edu.np

Abstract

Manohara Durbar, a Rana architecture in Kageshwori Manohara Municipality, Kathmandu, built in 1879, experienced a transformation from an aristocratic residence to a place of political imprisonment before its final destruction. Despite of its historical significance, there is still of scholarly research gap on the structural and institutional preservation issues associated with it. This qualitative study, based on Nora's cultural memory theory, explores this palace's historical significance, vulnerability, and conservation challenges. The author gathered data through historical documents, field observations, and planned interviews with local Rana elders and descendants. According to the thematic analysis, the primary cause of its destruction was political dispute. In order to protect the remaining historical preservation in the Kathmandu Valley, the findings identify the architectural heritage as a crucial pillar of community identity. They conclude with urgent policy recommendations for municipal historical preservation and heritage conservation policies. .

Keywords: *Rana architecture, cultural memory, vulnerability, historical preservation, heritage conservation*

Introduction

The Manohara Durbar was located at Kageshwori Manohara Municipality, ward number 7 (previous Gothatar VDC-7), Durbar Marg, Force Park, Kathmandu. Nowadays we can easily get public buses from Ratna Park or Jadibuti to reach this destination. Digital platforms record the initial area of the palace about 500 ropani so does Purushottam Shamsher JBR (2023). Thakur Pratap Jung Bahadur Rana, one of the oldest living generations of Jagat Jung, adds that the land of the palace area was distributed among brothers. Now it is limited to 26 ropani only. The mirrored L-shaped building was east to west nine and north to south seven storey. The nine

storey Durbar had 52 doors on the ground floor, but in other floors, there were doors and windows too. Nripendra Pratap, a brother of Thakur Pratap tells that the palace was not suitable for residence during 1960s when he saw it as a child.

After 1963, the palace looked fully destroyed. Only compound walls were left. The only surviving feature, according to JBR (2023), is a pine tree that dates back to the palace's 1879 construction, but Shambhu Pratap, another brother of Thakur Pratap remembers the pine tree planted by Jagat Jung was cut after the 2015 earthquake. “We were heartbroken to chop the tree because it was the memento of our ancestor. We were missing it,” he says, “but it was very old and weak, so it could cause the accident in the street.” There are only some stones left as memento now in the Durbar location. Sanjaya Pratap, Shambhu Pratap’s son, added that people took some stones from there to make temples and religious places. We can see some trees, a Batika (garden or park) and a temple, which were planted and built later on. According to Nora (1989), these marks turn into lieux de mémoire (sites of memory), physical locations that sustain memory when living surroundings vanish..

JJBR (2023) states Manohara palace as massive, towering and magnificent structure. There was a fan near the palace that could generate electricity in the absence of light. There were some meeting halls with different names. Situated in twelve kilometres southeast of central Kathmandu, Manohara Durbar (Figure 1) was praised for its neoclassical architecture with gardens, a variety of structures, and tasteful courtyards. It was made up of tiles, bricks, stones, woods and mud. Though the real architects of this monument is unknown (JBR, 2023), the local elders explain that some of the experts were brought from England. They had deep knowledge of design and construction of the buildings. Because of the lack of thick human settlement, one could easily count the houses from the highland. Various flowers, pine and fruit trees had covered the rural area. Thakur Pratap describes that there was a prison area nearby which was known as Karagar. Now it is named as

Figure 1
Manohara Durbar



Source: From *Manohara Durbar* [Photograph], by unknown author, 2026, Wikipedia (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manohara_Durbar#/media/File:Jagat_Jung_Rana_Durbar.jpg). In the public domain.

Kadaghari. The policemen guarding in the palace had to get firewood from the palace for cooking because they lacked firewood. After some time, when the authority knew that the palace area was a private property, they called back the police. These narrative fragments that are framed within Pierre Nora's theory of cultural memory turn the palace into a key location of memory..

The Manohara Durbar is closely connected to Jagat Jung, the elder son of the former Prime Minister Jung Bahadur Rana. Jung Bahadur was married for the second time, to the sister of Sanak Singh in February 1839. She afterwards became the mother of Jagat Jung and Jeet Jung (Mukerji, 1909). Nanda Kumari, Jagat Jung's mother, had given Jung Bahadur four children, Badan Kumari his first girl, Jagat Jung and Jeet Jung, his sons, and Tara Kumari, another daughter. During these unstable political times in Nepal, Jagat Jung was involved with state affairs and sidelined his family (Rana, 2024). In those days, the Rana and Shah dynasties maintained family links through Jagat Jung's marriage as a child to Princess Tika Rajya Laxmi, the daughter of King Surendra Shah (Gartoula, 2019). On linking the Ranas' genealogy to the Shah rulers' celestial position, the union strengthened their legitimacy. As a result, these marriage links became an essential instrument for preserving the complex power structure within the Nepalese court for many decades. Some digital platforms tell that Jagat Jung had received the palace "as a dowry from King Surendra" (Rana, 2013), but JBR (2063) describes that its maker was Jagat Jung. From here, he observed the Kathmandu Valley, particularly the military grounds and the Thapathali Durbar, using a British telescope.

Jagat Jung's life was a story of high-stakes political scheming and eventual tragedy (Rana, 2024). After the Kot Massacre, Jung Bahadur Rana awarded his brothers the prime ministership as a token of appreciation for their assistance during his rise to power, but in Jagat's own opinion, as the eldest son of Jung Bahadur, he was the rightful heir to the prime ministership. Ranodip Singh Kunwar was appointed prime minister over the death of Jung Bahadur in 1877, although the oppressive commander-in-chief Dhir Shamsher remained the supreme ruler (Shrestha, 2025). Jagat fought the ancestral succession that favoured his relatives for much of his career, but he was banished and removed from the roll of succession because of his desire, which led him to make a dangerous agreement with Crown Prince Trailokya in an effort to depose his uncle, Dhir Shamsher. Jagat Jung grew bitter of the current rulers after his family's political influence was taken away (JBR, 2019). Finally, the Shamsher brothers shot Jagat at Manohara Durbar and killed Prime Minister Ranoddeep Singh at Narayanhiti Palace on November 22, 1885. A soldier murdered Juddha Pratap, Jagat's oldest son. Princess Tika died after falling on the marble steps while running.

A plate with their severed heads was presented to Bir Shamsheer. Tara Kumari, the daughter of Jung Bahadur who had wed Crown Prince Trailokya, as well as other sons and grandchildren, had to flee outside the Kathmandu valley or hide in British India in order to protect their lives (Shrestha, 2025). The glory of this palace started to fade with the fall of Jagat and his family.

Objectives

Manohara Durbar is a significant but little-known aspect of Nepal's architectural and political history. The foundation of this paper is the concept that historical monuments continue to touch local identity and collective memory even after they are lost. This paper aims to fill the gap by investigating two main research questions:

- (1) How do local Rana elders remember the architectural design, location, and cultural significance of Manohara palace?
- (2) What primary and secondary causes were responsible for the Durbar's destruction?

This paper focuses on two primary areas related to the palace's history and analysis of its vulnerability. It explains these objectives by connecting Pierre Nora's framework of lieux de mémoire (sites of memory). This theoretical lens examines how the physical remains of the palace act as a crucial geographic link for local collective memory. This paper has the following objectives:

- 1) To examine Durbar's architectural, political, and historical significance as a key cultural site in the Municipality.
- 2) To identify the threats regarding this palace and other local historical monuments.

Methodology

The qualitative research approach used in this paper is appropriate for examining the elaborate, subjective, and context-dependent aspects of historical memory and architectural legacy. A strictly quantitative or logical approach would be insufficient because Manohara Durbar no longer exists now. This historical case study also uses Nora's memory theory to demonstrate how abandonment led to the palace's downfall by analysing the actual structure. It recreates the Durbar's lost material and social realities by combining records with first-hand recollections.

The study gathers data in two parallel streams in order to complete this paper. The first is library research, which entails a methodical examination of both primary and secondary data. Examining historical publications, books, archival photos, architectural surveys, and published histories of Nepal's Rana era are all part of this. These documents establish factual baseline about the Durbar's construction,

architectural style, ownership, and final degradation. The second is gathering oral histories. The author spent about three hours seeing the site and conducting semi-structured in-person interviews with three elderly local Ranas for 30-45 minutes regarding their vivid recollections and hearsay of the palace's last decades. The conversation was in Nepali, so the author translated the data into English. Sanjaya Pratap Rana, a new generation local supported the author in photography, frequent phone calls, site showing and his palace insights.

The author has found many difficulties in collecting the data. There was no one in the locality who saw the palace in its initial condition. The elderly locals informed as they were informed by previous generation. No written document or related photo can provide rich, descriptive information like the Durbar's colour, scale, surrounding landscape, and function in community life. In order to create a thorough, multi-perspective assessment of Manohara Durbar's legacy, data analysis uses thematic analysis to find recurrent themes and differences between textual records and oral narratives with some related photos.

Literature Review

Researchers, writers, and filmmakers have depicted Manohara Durbar in their works. Its description and tragic transformation defines its historical tale. According to Purushottam Shamsher JBR, Manohara Durbar was a magnificent residence constructed by General Jagat Jang in 1878 AD (1935 BS) over a vast 500-ropani estate. After Jagat Jang was murdered during a political dispute in 1885 AD (1942 BS), the palace fell into ruin (JBR, 2023). It served as both a dwelling and a center for the Jung family's fluctuating fortunes during the "Struggle for Power" of the Rana dynasty (The Nepali Voice, 2021). The collapse of the Jungs and the rise of the Shamsheres ultimately resulted in the residence's abandoning and physical destruction (Rana, 1973; Shah, 2016). Diamond Shamsher's novel *Seto Bagh* and Neer Shah's film adaptation both portray Manohara Durbar as a tragic symbol of lost Rana glory.

Sarita Maharjan finds it difficult to preserve these European-style durbars. They have "private" or "institutional" nature, so they do not receive care as the squares of the Malla era (Maharjan, 2012). When we fear of losing a historic heritage, we start to talk of its value. In this way, fear forces us to care our heritage (Harrison, 2013). In the example of Manohara Durbar, this model critically examines how the site may be actively reinterpreted within the current community before its historical worth is completely erased, rather than just lamenting its rapid urbanization and structural ruin. According to Maharjan (2012), "urban pressure" is a major human concern that causes historical sites to become fragmented due to uncontrolled construction and fast

population increase in places like Kageshwori Manohara. Urbanisation frequently puts contemporary infrastructure ahead of cultural heritage, resulting in what observers refer to as "perishing" history (Shrestha, 2026). To Harrison, heritage is a dynamic, dialogic process of "future-making", actively created, maintained, and renegotiated in the present, rather than a fixed collection of objects from the past.

The Durbar's existence is silently but frequently threatened by institutional neglect. One physical example of this institutional indifference is the disappearance of Manohara's architectural elements (Alchetron, 2026). The condition of Manohara Durbar reflects a wider transition from embedded political memory to a type of precarious heritage, drawing on Pierre Nora's distinction between *lieux de mémoire* and *milieux de mémoire*, where sites of memory emerge precisely at the moment when lived, organic environments of memory begin to fade (Nora, 1989). This transition means we move from living memories (*milieux*) to artificial memory sites (*lieux*), making us depend on archives, civic duty, and deliberate recall (anamnesis) to save the past. Laurajane Smith (2006) has defined Authorized Heritage Discourse (AHD) that gives authorities the power to control heritage. They only prioritize official buildings and big sites, but neglect local and traditional practices. In this way, the living history of the community changes into fixed, state-approved monuments.

As written in *Kathmandu Valley Style*, Nepal's old buildings, from Malla to Rana, always tie two things together. The first one is the building and the other is keeping the old style alive through memory. This connection never breaks (Choegyal et al., 2008). Thus, agreeing with Nora and Smith, the Manohara Durbar case highlights the constitutive gap between architectural materiality and discursive heritage production, suggesting that without their mutual integration into preservation frameworks, heritage becomes a signifier detached from lived geographical practice. In his historical narrative *Shree Tin Haruko Tathya Britanta, Part One* (2019), Purushottam Shamsher JBR describes the ongoing inner conflict among Rana rulers and provides a critical evaluation of the positive and negative attributes of the Rana prime ministers. In addition to JBR's internal political chronicle, Rana et al. (2003) offer a visually rich, insider narrative in *The Ranas of Nepal* that emphasizes the dynasty's luxurious lifestyle, courtly interest, and enduring architectural legacy. By doing this, they are able to contextualize family conflict within the broader material and cultural history of the dictatorship.

This study fills a gap in architectural history by integrating structural vulnerability assessment with Nora's theory of memory sites. It makes this shift by looking at physical destruction of the heritage, and how the authorities forget their own history. It

changes the way we talk about heritage. The state can play an active role in removing the cultural sites. This paper shows that losing cultural heritage of Kageshwori Manohara Municipality is not an accident. It is a structural problem and a political act.

Discussion

To understand the reasons behind the destruction of Manohara Durbar, we need to evaluate the historical background of Nepal as well as we should understand how the Kathmandu Valley changed over time. Once the palace was symbol of beauty and power, but now it has become a symbol of neglect. Natural causes, human activities, and institutional shortcomings all contribute to its gradual deterioration. This section offers the foundation for examining the different causes of its near extinction.

The root cause for the destruction of the Manohara Palace is political. By granting Jung Bahadur Rana the hereditary title of Shree 3 Maharaj in a Lalmohar on August 6, 1876 AD, King Surendra formally ensured that the title of prime minister would stay in his family. For Nora (1989), however, that Lalmohar is a "site of memory", a political document that overwrites living communal memory with official record. Although Jagat Jung, his eldest son, was supposed to inherit the throne, Jung Bahadur made a lifetime agreement that the title would first pass laterally to his brothers (JBR, 2019). It had displeased Jagat Jung. Commander-in-Chief Dhir Shamsher, the brother of Ranoddeep Singh, wanted to deprive Jung Bahadur's family of power and authority forever, because if he did not do this, he and his family would not be able to reach power. As Dhir Shamsher discovered Jagat Jung's political plot, he imprisoned Jagat in India. After Dhir Shamsher's death, Jagat Jung returned and won the Prime Minister's favor, deepening the conflict between the Rana and Shamsher camps. However, his relatives from Shamsher viewed him as a danger. For Nora (1989), such family divisions become frozen in official records, displacing the flexibility of living memory.

Bir Shamsher, son of Dhir Shamsher, assassinated the Prime Minister Ranoddeep Singh in 1885 and took over the government. There was a coup in 1885 that took Jagat Jung's life in his Manohara Durbar. This marked the end of the Jung branch's power and the start of Nepal's Shamsher era. The descendants of Jung Bahadur were afraid, according to Thakur Pratap and his brothers; some fled to other locations, while others were murdered. According to Komal Pratap Jung Rana, the sixth generation of Jung Bahadur, "The palace didn't just collapse; it was torn down" (Sedhain, 2011, 6:48 — 6:51). Manohara Palace's devastation can be linked to cruelty, political revenge, and uncontrolled state authority. As Bir Shamsher's rulers were harsh and exclusive, common folk were unable to enter the palace. Nobody opposed or stopped

the government from taking control of Manohara Palace's property. They started destroying the palace and seizing all of its belongings after killing Jagat Jung, the owner of the palace and his spouse. Disgraced women from the Shah and Rana families were held captive in Manohar Palace (JBR, 2023). In the end, nothing remained for Jung Bahadur's heirs, resulting in the total loss of the palace's construction and legacy.

Besides this primary cause, other secondary causes or effects are those that have their base in the palace itself or in the way, it is run and maintained. They originate from the state of the building and the shortcomings in its maintenance, utilisation, and administration. These secondary causes, motivated by the root political cause, show themselves as a complete rejection for routine maintenance and a failure on the part of the authorities to accept responsibility for preservation. They also occur when someone does not regularly notice and examine a structure. In such cases, human carelessness within the institution and the state of the palace itself directly contribute to the slow decline. This paper summarizes some of the major internal causes of destruction of this monument:

Structural Weakness

As we analyse through Rodney Harrison's (2013) critical heritage lens, material damage shows a clear interplay between the skills of past and present. Harrison shows that the main reasons for weak buildings are the slow aging of old bricks, the use of weak building methods long ago, and the lack of strong support. The Manohara Durbar and other Rana-era palaces were constructed mostly using brick and mortar, often mixed with lime plaster and local materials that produced from traditional building skills (Thapa, 2025). Without care, this slow decay leads to collapse by causing stress, cracks, and bending.

Institutional Neglect

The palace continued declining because of neglect by the authorities. It got neither official care nor physical repairs. The authorities stopped providing police security as they realized it was private property. The palace lost its royal status when its owner, Commanding General Jagat Jung Rana, died and the Rana dynasty went through later political changes. Bir Shamsheer and his followers did not want it to flourish. They captured most of the valuables and land from it (Sedhain, 2011). For decades, everybody abandoned and ignored it. This let the weather speed up its decay. Weak government systems, unclear responsibility among authorities, and the lack of regular repairs are the causes for its gradual breakdown (UNESCO, 2015). Fear and resistance from local people further lowered the level of monitoring and care. No one took quick action and the palace got worse day by day.

Inappropriate Restoration Practices

Inappropriate restoration practices do not support the palace's own original style, materials, or building methods. They often use new materials that never matched traditional brick, lime, and wood. Smith (2006) discusses such actions affect the deeper meaning of heritage. These changes directly threatened Durbar's real authenticity. This poor fix weakened the Durbar's overall look and structural strength. It also created a material imbalance as well. That increased its weakness to long-term decay, not even made it stronger.

Abandonment and Lack of Use

Abandonment and lack of use turned the palace into destruction. When there was no administrative and residential responsibility, the palace stopped being a piece of living history (Nora, 1989). Unlike Singha Durbar, which is now in use, Manohara Durbar remained vacant. Heritage needs people's care to stay strong. When it is abandoned, that bond is broken (Harrison, 2013). Plants grew inside the walls. Birds and spiders make their residence in it. As a result, the palace lost its social significance and eventually fell apart physically.

Apart from internal causes, some external factors also matter. People and nature can make the destruction worse. According to Lisa Choegyal et al. (2008), the design of buildings play a major role in the destruction of "Kathmandu Valley style". When harsh weather affects the area around the monuments, protecting these places gets very hard. As David Lowenthal (1998) warns that environmental changes badly damage the context of historic sites. This constant threat affects the old structures. It creates serious problems that inside maintenance alone cannot solve. As a result, these external pressures gradually destroy the structure. Some of the shortlisted causes are described below:

Environmental and Climatic Degradation

Mostly, the environmental and climatic conditions caused the palace's slow decline. The loss of what Nora (1989) refers to, as "the un-self-conscious experience of history" was primarily responsible for the palace's gradual degradation. Its structural components deteriorate with time as live tradition fades, turning it into a cold structure that we are "afraid of forgetting" about. Additionally, this aging process is increased by the contamination of contemporary archival memory. Without Nora's "warm, living tissue of group identity" to protect it from weathering elements, the palace's physical state declines.

Natural Disasters and Seismic Risks

Manohara palace faced great earthquakes in 1933 and 1988 that also contributed the age of the palace negatively. Since the translational behaviour of the center of gravity and the rotational behaviour around that center describe the overall response of the structure, the restoring force, contact force, and other external forces are added to determine the forces operating on each element during an earthquake or natural disaster (Kiyono et al., 2017). The palace faced serious external dangers from natural calamities, especially earthquakes, floods, and landslides. Nepal's high earthquake risk makes historic buildings especially vulnerable to unexpected and serious destruction. According to Lowenthal (1998), the physical durability necessary to preserve community history is threatened by natural disasters including earthquakes, floods, and landslides. These unpredictable occurrences undermine foundations, create structural changes, and hasten long-term damage. Finally, each event adds costs and challenges, forcing experts to combat decay and protect the vulnerable remains we honor.

Human Pressure and Urbanization

The palace was partly decayed because of human actions outside official care. Theft, illegal activities, and neglect affected its historical value. Nora (1989) says that when a monument faces city growth, neglect, and unauthorized work, it does not just lose bricks. It stops being a living historic area and becomes a weak, damaged memory of the past. There was no proper security in the palace, so no one noticed these acts. Also, many buildings were built near the palace that put more pressure on the heritage site. It affected the natural area around it and reduced its boundaries. According to Harrison (2013), the active conversation between historical artistry and current physical deterioration is disrupted by this uncontrolled modern progress.

Socio-economic Constraints and Low Public Visits

Socioeconomic conditions and a lack of public participation have also contributed to the palace's degradation. Based on Nora (1989), this lack of community involvement is a reflection of the failure of contemporary "duty memory," in which society no longer feels obligated to maintain its history. Authorities frequently believe there is no public interest in the property because of its remote location and local financial limitations. Additionally, communal responsibility disappears since the public is still ignorant of its historical significance. Without civic duty, the palace gets less budget and public interest.

Considering the combined effects of both internal and external factors that resulted in the complete destruction of this important historical legacy, even though the palace is no longer there, locals still remember it when they visit and view the site

and Jagat Jung Smriti Batika garden (Figure 2). The palace's decline is a reflection of the deterioration of "living memory," which Nora (1989) argues is reduced when modernity replaces traditional behaviours. Its material continuity was undermined by internal issues like structural deterioration, poor maintenance, weak management, and inadequate rehabilitation. Its demise was caused by outside factors like environmental deterioration, natural calamities, human intervention, and low public participation. All of these actions interfered with its ability to serve as a live site of memory, leaving only broken remains. Consequently, this monument became an open area, proving how abandonment changes memory sites and highlighting preservation needs.

Figure 2
Jagat Jung Smriti Batika



Note. From Jagat Jung Smriti Batika [Photograph], by S.P. Rana, 2026.

Nora (1989) claims that our daily ties to the past, or "living memory," decrease as modern ones replace ancient practices. As a result, people save history by creating symbolic "centers of memory" out of locations or objects, such as the ruins of Manohara Palace. Through these man-made links, societies can keep an identity that has naturally weakened. When we properly care for these icons, we turn short-lived customs into lasting monuments.

Recommendation and Conclusion

After natural disasters damaged old monuments and affect local community memories, the state restored monuments like Kathmandu Durbar Square and Dharahara. They wanted to hold an "eternal present." However, when we officially preserve them in this way, living memory turns into a fixed national identity. In the end, political neglect was the main cause of the destruction of Manohara Durbar. Internal and external

problems were only secondary effects. The government pushed national stories above local preservation, effectively finalizing the palace's collapse. This article conceptually advances our understanding of how state-driven official history systematically erases living, organic communal memory by presenting these monuments as contested lieux de mémoire.

As part of sustainable urban and tourism development, the Kageshwori Manohara Municipality Plan and Programme 2081/82 highlights the significance of preserving and advancing local cultural and historical legacy (Kageshwori Manohara Municipality, 2081/82). In light of this, it is respectfully recommended that the Municipality takes into account any future efforts to rebuild in a smaller version of Manohara Durbar for a memorial or symbolically revive the historical site of it. The municipality has named the road of Bista Gaun as Jagat Jung Marg for short distance. The Rana families from Ward Number 7 request the municipality to preserve their ancestral heritage by conserving the Smriti Batika and establishing a statue of Jagat Jung to honor him. They also propose naming the Jadibuti-Mulpani road Jagat Jung Road to honor their legacy.

In conclusion, restoring Manohara Durbar area helps Kageshwori Manohara Municipality financially, culturally, and educationally. The municipality cannot rebuilt the palace as it was before, but it can construct a small monument to preserve the past. This project is not just about saving history. It can also be a smart investment in promoting sustainable tourism. If the town changes the site into a lively place for learners and visitors, it can uplift the local economy, raise cultural awareness, and enable the community re-establish with its lost past. Ultimately, this initiative guarantees sustainable heritage preservation, promoting a deeper understanding of history for upcoming generations.

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