

The Retreat House Restoration Project on the Holy Manjushree Hillock in Swayambhu, Nepal

There are five houses on the holy hillock of Manjushree Hill/ Saraswati Hill that are in dire need of restoration. They were built in the 30's after a devastating earthquake that damaged most homes, temples and other buildings in the Kathmandu Valley. The Swayambhu Stupa area, of which Manjushree Hill is part, is listed as a World Heritage Site. An organization has been formed, Manjushree Pragya Gyan Vihar Sangh, with the vision to transform the retreat houses and surrounding courtyard into part of the 'living museum' scheme.

Below is a picture of four of the houses and courtyard in front:



The first house (below) is on the southern corner of the courtyard. It was built by devotees of the 'Golden Temple' in Patan for the purpose of providing rooms for practitioners who wanted to do retreats. At that time Swayambhu and the surrounding area were considered to be a remote, secluded area, perfect for practitioners of the dharma. Today two Newari (the original ethnic group of the Kathmandu Valley) nuns live there; one is in her late 70's, the younger one lives with her mother who is a bit mentally unstable and was abused by the police some years back. A Nepali family who help take care of the houses also live in that building.



The second house (below) was built by a Newari nun, Jogmaya, and is called 'Jogmaya Gompa' (monastery). Two Newari nuns live there. Every full moon women from various villages and parts of Kathmandu come to take the 8 precepts for twenty-four hours. Arriving in the afternoon, they spend the night. Early the next morning, before the sun rises, a monk from a nearby monastery bestows the precepts, after which they recite the 'Namasangkiti' prayer. Later in the morning many walk around Swayambhu make offerings and prayers. Just before noon lunch is served, after which they return to their homes.



The third house was placed between the two existing houses, thus only the front and back walls were constructed. An elder woman built this house for the purpose of having a place to get away from the city and be immersed in religious practice. Because I have been living there for the last thirty-five years and doing some yearly upkeep, the house is still standing. Many who come to my house, when they see the cracked corners, ask how I dare still live there...I shrug my shoulders and say, 'it's held up by prayers!'

The photo below is of both the third and forth house.



The fourth house, on the northern corner, was built by a Newari couple who had no children...the husband did six-month retreats in the mountains in Helumbu and six months on Manjushree Hill. His wife walked back and forth several times a year between the two retreat houses. This house is now so dilapidated, no one can live in it.



The fifth house, which lies across the courtyard next to the monastery, it is in the background behind the stupa. This house was built by a Newari nun probably sometime in the 60's. After she passed away two young nuns, her students, lived there until it became too dangerous for inhabitation. Two summers ago the backside of the house completely collapsed during the monsoon (rainy) season.

Below is a drawing of the retreat house project:



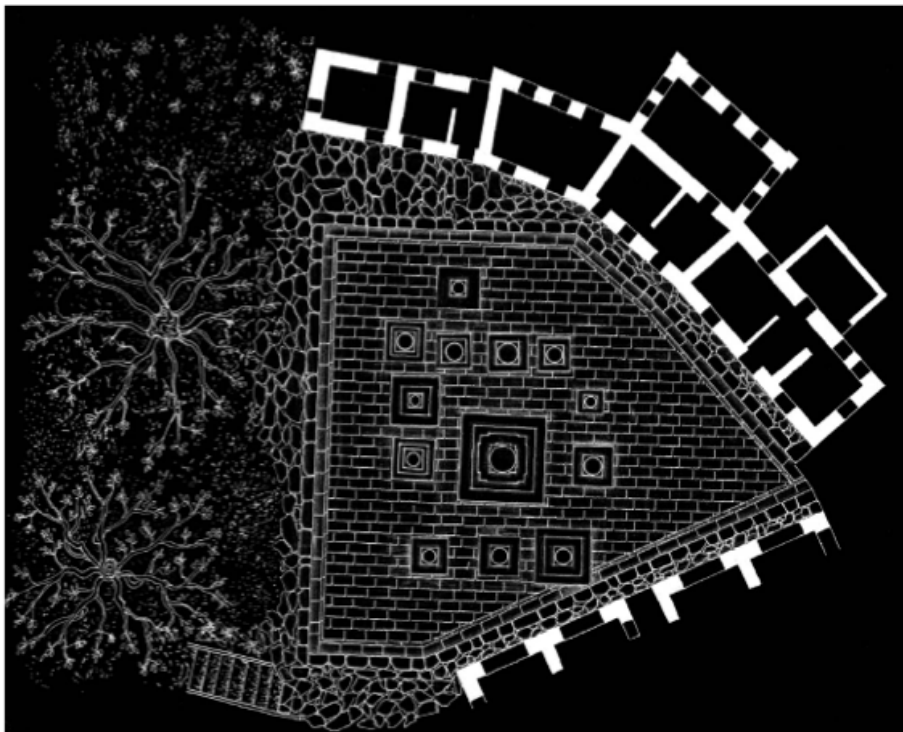
Computer rendering of a proposed restoration employing traditional building style and materials. The roof will be covered with red-painted corrugated steel as seen in the images on the right.

After the houses are restored, the nuns presently living there, myself and the Nepali family looking after the area will continue to live there. The remaining three, four rooms will be used for short term retreats and for housing the devotees who come at full moon to take the 8 precepts as well as for participants of the Nyung-nye retreat that is held at Drubthop Rinpoche's monastery on all of the special Buddhist holy days. The Nyung-nye retreat is a minimum of four days and five nights.

Besides the houses, the front courtyard, which consists of 13 stupas, one main stupa in the center and 12 smaller ones surrounding, also needs some restoration work done. Stone slabs will be used for the ground, the bases of each stupa will be aesthetically joined to the stone flooring in a traditional manner, any enamel paint that has been used on the stupas will be removed and any damaged parts will be fixed.



Below is a drawing of the plans for the courtyard and stupas in front of the houses:



The stairways on both the eastern and western sides of the area need to be redone properly and aesthetically. Below the area of the retreat houses is a sacred stupa, which has several names. Many call it 'Purano (old) Swayambhu', because it is said to be older than Swayambhu stupa itself. It is in need of repair, the statues in the surrounding courtyard need to be secured and aesthetically placed, plus the area above is to be landscaped.

