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UNSETTLING MODERNITY: SHIFTING VALUES AND CHANGING HOUSING STYLES IN THE KATHMANDU VALLEY

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Abstract

Culture has always been important for the character of the cities, as have the civic and public institutions that sustain a lifestyle and provide an identity. Substantial evidence of the unique historical, urban civilisation remains within the traditional settlements in the Kathmandu Valley in Nepal; manifested in houses, palaces, temples, rest houses, open spaces, festivals, rituals, customs and cultural institutions. Indigenous knowledge and practices prescribed the arrangement of houses, roads and urban spaces giving the city a distinctive physical form, character and a unique oriental nativeness. In technical sense, these societies did not have written rules for guiding development. In recent decades, the urban culture of the city has been changing with the forces of urbanisation and globalisation and the demand for new buildings and spaces. New residential design is increasingly dominated by distinctive patterns of Western suburban ideal comprising detached or semi-detached homes and high rise tower blocks. This architectural iconoclasm can be construed as a rather crude response to the indigenous culture and built form. The paper attempts to dismantle the current tension between traditional and contemporary 'culture' (and hence society) and housing (or built form) in the Kathmandu Valley by engaging in a discussion that cuts across space, time and meaning of architecture as we know it.

Key words: *Housing, architecture, traditional, modernity, Kathmandu Valley*

INTRODUCTION

Kathmandu Valley in Nepal has a unique conglomeration of indigenous urban settlements spread out in historic core areas of the three cities - Kathmandu, Bhaktapur and Lalitpur, which encompass seven monument zones of the UNESCO's World Heritage Listed, Kathmandu Valley World Heritage Site. Everyday activities in and around these settlements illustrate an ongoing interaction between society, culture and the environment through numerous religious and cultural practices.

Various rituals and religious practices – mainly Hindu and Buddhist – shaped the urban spaces and forms giving the cities a distinctive medieval flavour. In the last two decades, spaces and buildings in the Valley are going through a transition, and the contemporary building typologies that have emerged are emblematic of the changing urban environment and behaviours articulated through new forms of identity, aspirations and aesthetics (Gutschow and Kreuzmann, 2013; Sengupta and Bhattarai Upadhyay, 2015; Shah, 2013) . New residential design is dominated by distinctive patterns following the Western suburban ideal of detached or semi-detached individual homes and high rise tower blocks. This building style is in contrast to the indigenous urban form interspersed by series of communal spaces, linkages and landmarks. Traditional houses were organized around a square where people from the extended families resided. Often the votive miniature temple, large water spouts or a well enhanced the aesthetics of the space and also provided the local residents the

opportunity to interact and socialise. The embedded nature of public and private spaces was unique to Nepalese society that accommodated the age old socio-cultural and religious practices. Today as Mumford (1937) contends 'a great many things stand in the way of grasping the role of the city and of transforming this basic means of communal existence' limiting not only opportunities for social interactions but also eroding traditional housing forms and spatial system.

The medieval urban culture that existed in the Kathmandu Valley until 19th century (Aranha, 1991; Gutschow and Kreutzmann, 2013; Tiwari, 2001) is being replaced rapidly by the new modernity, which penetrated urban landscape of the Valley and the lifestyle of its residents in the last four to five decades. The new urban landscape of the Kathmandu Valley today is attributed to various forces of urbanisation and globalisation and the demand for new buildings and spaces. Traditional buildings are being replaced by incongruous tall buildings with little emphasis on artistic taste (Shrestha, 1981) whilst the shift from owner-built housing to developer built housing has accelerated this trend. More recently, multi storeyed apartment buildings have dotted the Kathmandu Valley skyline which Shah (2013: 53) claims 'offered a new product in the market for the newly rich'. The recent devastating earthquake of 25 April 2015 further placed the appropriateness of the new residential architecture at the forefront of discussion.

The paper discusses the current tension between traditional and contemporary 'culture' (and hence society) and housing (or built form) in the Kathmandu Valley by engaging in a discussion that cuts across space, time and meaning of building. The next section discusses the organisation of space and house types in the traditional and contemporary Kathmandu Valley to illustrate the major ideological difference between the conception and creation of urban architecture and space then and now. The paper concludes that residential architecture in Kathmandu Valley today stands disengaged from its glorious past and remains disoriented.

RELIGIOUS VALUES, SOCIO-CULTURAL NORMS AND TRADITIONAL ARCHITECTURE

The distinct urban form and spatial pattern of the traditional quarters in the Kathmandu Valley dates roughly back to 2000 years, with multiple dynasties (such as, Licchavis, Mallas, Ranas and lately Shahs) contributing to city building. Building and artistic activities peaked during the 15th and 16th centuries as the Malla rulers from the three city states- Kathmandu, Bhaktapur and Lalitpur (Patan) competed with each other in building temples, monuments and public spaces. This period is regarded as one of the glorious periods in the history of Kathmandu Valley that provided distinctive identity to the architecture and urban form of the Valley.

Royal palaces and squares assumed the highest importance as administrative, bureaucratic and religious spaces. These were multifunctional spaces implying an extended involvement of 'Royal institution' in the society. The traditional towns reflect organic growth over centuries, 'the splendour of the *Newar*¹ town design seems to emanate from an innate sense of aesthetics, a natural rhythmic articulation achieved over a long time span rather than a conscious organisation of space according to dictate' (Slusser, 1982: 94) but scholars (Müller,

¹ Indigenous inhabitants of the Kathmandu Valley.

1981; Tiwari, 2008) argue that they are certainly not unplanned settlements despite the lack of a regular road pattern, a general misconception about a planned town. The layout of the towns generally centred on a palace with immediate surrounding areas occupied by the elites – people from the higher castes². The lower castes lived outside the city walls. Importance of the district declined with distance from the city centre (Wright, 1877).

Typology of a Newar house

A typical *Newar* house was a three to four storeyed building which either faced a courtyard or a street. On the ground floor, rooms facing the street were often used as shops and the inner rooms facing the courtyard were used as open living areas or workshops, approached through courts (Müller, 1981). Typical building materials were red bricks laid out on mud mortar. Timbers were used for floors, doors, windows and roof structures. Almost all the building materials were sourced locally and built by the local builders and craftsmen. Houses of the rich had ornately carved wooden windows facing the streets. The windows were small to shut out the winter cold. Courtyards were shared spaces to observe religious or everyday activities.



[Figure 1 here]

[Figure 1: Traditional houses along a street in historical quarter in Lalitpur (source: author, 2014)]

The individual house was a part of the larger group, a neighbourhood (*tol*), which consisted of houses built around courtyards and people generally moved through a series of

² Class hierarchy is the stratification of the society largely based on the traditional occupations of the people in the Kathmandu Valley.

interconnected courtyards to get to streets and nearby public squares. Some houses are even connected at the attic level, and doors are opened on the days of large communal feasts (Pant, 2002). The doors were very low in height and it is believed that the reason for this was to show respect to your own house when entering it by bowing your head (Haaland, 1982).

Each *tol* of around 150-300 houses was intricately linked to people based on their caste and occupation, thereby giving them a unique collective identity. The location of the house in a typical street or in *tol* indicated the social status of the owner (Shrestha, 1981). Each house used to be two to three storeyed and usually housed a joint family of parents, their children, and grandchildren, living together for social, as well as, economic reasons (Haaland, 1982).

An individual's house is the first place of worship, where there is usually a corner or a separate room, usually on the top floor, dedicated to different deities. There is also a place of worship in the courtyard, which is worshipped by the families living around the courtyard. Away from the periphery of the house, at the first junction of the streets, there is a temple, often for Lord *Ganesh* or Goddess *Bhagavati*. In larger open spaces, there are bigger temples. There are a number of temples spread out across the city. Each family is attached to these deities located at different parts of the city and their association with them is based on daily or annual rituals, or festivals held at a particular time of the year. The festivals attached to certain deities and located in certain neighbourhoods, also provide unity and belonging to the neighbourhood. The local religious procession is the manifestation of this cohesion (Sharma, 1997). The living quarters, distinctly divided according to caste groups, were assigned different set of rules for building, for example, people on the lower caste were prohibited of using tiles on their roofs; instead, their roofing material had to be thatch. The procedure for building a house was different for each caste with elaborate rituals generally prescribed for higher caste groups. Houses of the elites, who lived closer to the palace, were valued more than the houses on a street or a lane, farther from the palace or the city centre (Wright, 1877).

Location, public spaces & activities

The traditional settlements in the Kathmandu Valley were usually compact, built on the higher grounds, where cultivation was difficult to conserve the agricultural land (Hosken, 1974). Surprisingly, within these compact settlements, there were plenty of public spaces where people met, markets were held, agricultural products were thrashed and dried, and various festivities were carried out (Korn, 1993; Wright, 1877). These activities spilled out from the private spaces of the house to the semi-private spaces of the courtyards to the public spaces such as, neighbourhood squares and streets, with very little demarcation between private and public spaces. The relationship between the buildings (both public and private) and the streets and open spaces illustrates not only an understanding of visual requirements but also of the functional and social needs of the population. Religious values, social structure and kinship relationships of the indigenous inhabitants of the Kathmandu Valley, the *Newars*, played significant roles in the provision of spaces in the cities in the Valley. Similarly, numerous religious festivals occurring throughout the year – and continue until today - determined the social and ritual hierarchy of the squares, streets in the cities. Maintenance of these spaces lay entirely on private or communal domains.

Guidelines, restrictions and incentives

As early as the mid-14th century, the *Newar* rulers established clear guidelines on what a house should look like and its value using religious scripture as a basis for settlement planning. These religious rules of allocating spaces in or outside the city based on one's caste group are a clear and early example of how rules regarding urban space have been used to reflect and reinforce social status. Building scale and visual harmony was emphasized with uniform building designs prescribed for the size and the structure of the building for different castes. Values of houses in different parts of the cities were standardised. This indicates the expected economic outcomes if the properties were to be sold, i.e. the identification of economic opportunities of the house and land (Wright, 1877).

Not only were there certain rules on how to build residences and where to build, there were systems in place to make sure that the public buildings and spaces were appropriately maintained. Once the public buildings and spaces were constructed, donations of various kinds were organised, which generally involved establishment of trust known as *guthi*, to fund long term maintenance and management of those spaces/structures (Tiwari, 2007).

SHIFTING VALUES, MODERN ASPIRATIONS AND CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURE

The Kathmandu Valley is the biggest urban centre in Nepal and includes five major urban areas: Kathmandu Metropolitan City, Lalitpur sub Metropolitan City, Bhaktapur Municipality, Kirtipur Municipality and Thimi Municipality each with varying degrees of urban development activities. Kathmandu Valley's expanding architectural modernity lends itself to exploration of its recent history. Historians in Nepal mark the year 1786 as the beginning of 'modern era' when Prithvi Narayan Shah (the first King of Unified Nepal) took over Kathmandu Valley and established Kathmandu as the capital of Nepal. From the commencement of the rule of Prithivi Narayan Shah, power of the state was transferred from the ruling Malla class and the elite Newars into the hands of the Shah dynasty and original Gorkhalis. However, while the Shah Royal family were the official rulers, there was a de facto seizure of power by prime ministers belonging to the Rana family between 1846-1951 (Slusser, 1982). The Rana rulers directed all the wealth of the country's treasury towards their own welfare and led extravagant lifestyles within luxurious palaces. Opposition was repressed and information and education was kept away from people (Müller, 1981). The indigenous Newars of the Kathmandu Valley, however, were less affected by the political chaos revolving around the continuous fighting between the small upper caste ruling classes, as the majority of the population was associated with trade and farming and had very little to do with the feudal class (Hosken, 1974).

Contemporary architecture in Kathmandu Valley has its roots in external influences. As early as 1850, Rana ruler Jung Bahadur Rana travelled to England to witness the development and military prowess of England and other European countries. His trip was the instigator to the creation of huge Neoclassical, baroque style palace buildings strewn in different parts of the Kathmandu Valley. These palaces became the identity of modernity in the early years as the pseudo renaissance columns and stucco decorations became a part of the Kathmandu Valley landscape (Shrestha, 1981). Still, modernisation in Nepal effectively began with the redevelopment of much of Juddha Sadak (renamed 'New Road' – to underscore advent of modernity) into a retail hub, which was following the 1934 earthquake (Gustchow and Kreutzmann, 2013). On reflection, modernity in Kathmandu Valley is analogous to

globalisation. In 1951 after the revolution to overthrow the autocratic Rana rule, the new democratic government opened the country to the outside world for the first time after more than a century of seclusion. Soon foreign donations started to pour in and international aid agencies started setting up offices in Nepal. In 1955, the country acquired its first airport bringing the city closer to the outside world. The growing importance of the Valley internationally was accompanied by rapid internal migration that brought diverse ethnic population with disparate material possession into the Valley (Proksch, 1995). The Valley's agricultural hinterland became the new material sites for development. Images from the 1960s and 1970s (Hagen 1980) show settlements still clustered around traditional town areas and along major transport routes, whereas between 1971 and 1981, residential land area grew twice (Doebele, 1987). Increasing exposure to the outside world fuelled by easy access to international print and visual media influenced the development of so-called modern architecture in the Valley. The landscape of uniformity and homogeneity in architectural style and design gave way to a collage of styles driven by images of Western modernity.

The first-ever plan for the Kathmandu Valley, the *Physical Development Plan for the Kathmandu Valley*, was prepared in 1969 followed by a number of planning studies and policy documents over the subsequent decades. Most of these documents discussed the gradual loss of the historic architecture in the Kathmandu Valley, but none made efforts to understand the underlying socio cultural mechanism which was successful in conserving the traditional environment in the Kathmandu Valley for centuries. Various controls, including the *Ancient Monument Preservation Act* that came into force in 1956, introduced a horde of building bye-laws mainly in and around historic centres, however, owing to difficulties in monitoring mechanism and lack of penalty for non-compliance, the enforcement of rules have been weak leading to indiscriminate conversions of many older buildings. The lack of adequate management and immense development pressures have been a major threat to the World Heritage sites and the peripheral areas (ICOMOS, 2005; Tiwari, 2001). This coupled with the failing planning guidelines and control mechanism can also be explained by what AlSayyad (2013: 3) calls the 'homogenizing forces of twentieth-century modernity'.

Development incrementalism

The contemporary urban environment of Kathmandu is dominated by individual piecemeal housing developments. Unlike the houses of the original *Newar* towns, these houses are usually very different in colour, design and in scale to each other. Introduction of reinforced concrete in the 1950s was instrumental in changing the traditional brick-walled residential houses into bungalow type structures which would start as a single storeyed residence with subsequent addition of floors as the family grew in size and the needs expanded (Shah 2010). More recent houses with multiple storeys had different families living in each floor rented out by the owners. With the rise in land price, housing plots became smaller as the residences rose in height disregarding the bye-laws. The new evolving landscape was marked by the reinforcement steel bars protruding from [sic] the top slab of buildings, in anticipation of future additions' (Shah, 2010, para 2).



[Figure 2 Here]

[Figure 2: Owner built house (source: author, 2014)]

Emergence of formal real estate

The privately planned residential enclaves in the city emerged around 2000, with the enactment of apartment act and deregulation of housing finance. In the turn of the century, the Indian real estate giant Ansal Group partnered with Chaudhary Group to launch the first apartment based housing project in Nepal 'Kathmandu Residency' in Lalitpur followed by Mount View Residency in Hattiban in Lalitpur. Those projects in fact predated the promulgation of Apartment Act making it a classic case of government apparatus playing a catch up with the market. Since then, about 150 private companies are registered with Nepal Land and Housing Developers' Association. Whilst the majority are one-off developers, more than 10 have built a successful real estate developer's business model. As of yet, the supply of housing estates and modern apartment complexes is mainly geared towards the upper middle class, including Non Resident Nepalese living abroad. In fact many of the developers specifically target the latter group. Real estate expositions are regularly organised in UK, USA and Australia that not only attracted overseas buyers but also brought their aspirations and lifestyles.

Middle class imaginaries: Contemporary residential architecture redefined

Private developers in Kathmandu Valley planned modern enclaves in a grid iron pattern, to mimic classic Western suburban neighbourhood designs. More recently, apartment towers have appeared in different parts of the city. Most of them are developed by the local investors, but lately Chinese, Korean and Indian investors have also entered the market.

One of the first housing companies to start planned housing colonies is the Civil Homes Pvt Ltd. Civil Homes is currently undertaking phase seven of housing development on the outskirts of the Kathmandu Metropolitan City. The past six developments have been hugely successful. The Civil Homes website claims it is 'one of the largest planned housing

undertakings in the country, it sets new standards of living, amenities and aesthetics'. The developer further claims that the development is specifically and authentically Nepalese:

It is a project undertaken by the Nepalese for the Nepalese people, with conscious efforts made to provide for local conditions, tastes and habits. The exquisitely designed buildings, though contemporary, fit in the Nepalese landscape. (Civil Homes, 2015)

The *Civil Homes Phase III* development located at Sunakothi in the southern part of Lalitpur district is one of the biggest housing developments. This development was marketed as a place with good views, a peaceful and healthy environment, tree lined boulevards leading to a central open space for community uses; full security with boundary walls, gates, and security guards; an onsite private school, clinic and postal services; as well as a reliable water supply and drainage systems (Civil Housing Program, undated). There are six types of houses depending upon the area of the land and the facilities, but each has some private open space and onsite parking. The prices of these houses at the time of their selling varied from approximately NRs. 3.35 million to 7.75 million (approximately equivalent to £20,563 to £47,571, as of July 2015) (Civil Homes, 2009; Civil Housing Program, undated). The developers claim that the housing complex is developed to achieve a greater sense of neighbourhood and to be environmentally friendly by utilising a low density grid street pattern with a hierarchy of road sizes (Civil Housing Program, undated).

Despite the nationalistic marketing blurb, the *Civil Homes* housing development deliberately imitates the subdivision design of Western gated communities. Entry to the housing is guarded by security personnel. The researcher observed that development is strictly zoned and there are no commercial activities within the residential areas – a contrast from the traditional neighbourhoods. Community facilities are allocated to a separate section of the complex. Although there are six different types of houses in the plan, the exteriors of the houses vary little with the same materials and design elements used. In contrast to downtown Kathmandu, and even new independently developed areas, the streets inside the complex were observed to be very quiet. The open space was also very quiet with no activities.



[Figure 3 Here]

[Figure 3: Houses at Civil Homes Development (Source: *Civil Homes website, accessed January 2016*)]

Another example of modern residential development in Kathmandu is the *Terraces* also located in Sunakothi. The *Terraces*, developed by *Valley Homes Pvt. Ltd.*, was marketed as a gated community. The properties were sold in 2009-2010, with prices starting at NRs. 12.17 million (approximately equivalent to £74,701) to NRs. 17.56 million (approximately equivalent to £107,786 as of August 2015) depending upon different house types. There are 12 different designs, with some potential for customisation to suit specific client needs. The *Terraces* had landscaped gardens, walking and jogging paths, wide open roads, open spaces, a soon to open community club with all the modern facilities (*Valley Homes Pvt. Ltd.*, undated; *Valley Homes, 2009*).

Inside the *Terraces* compound, visited between 2012 and 2014, the houses presented an idealised image of the houses in Western countries with European neoclassical elements used in the treatment of the exteriors. These houses are luxurious and expensive in comparison to those in the *Civil Homes* development. There are no visible references to indigenous architecture or neighbourhood design.

Apartment buildings are the most recent residential developments in the Kathmandu Valley. The biggest advantage the apartments had over the individual houses like *Civil Homes* or *Terraces* were the lower costs but similar facilities. One such development is the *Sun City*. *Sun City* is the 'luxurious and affordable apartment township', built in the suburb of Gothatar in Kathmandu. The *Shangrila Housing Pvt Ltd.*, developers of the *Suncity*, claim on their website that the township was developed

to ensure that it serves to all those who believe in enthusiastic living...the apartments offer a fine blend of the comforts of Luxury resort...*Sun City Global Township* is all about modernized, sophisticated yet smooth living. We have made sure that *Sun City* provides all the basic necessities for smooth living such as good supply of water and security, so that you can live a hassle free life and enjoy great moments that it offers.

Similarly, developers of the TCH Tower IV – Sitapaila, a suburb on the outskirts of Kathmandu city claim, ‘that apartments are the need and the ultimate solution of this rapidly growing society’. The features of the development such as, ‘round the clock security system’, ‘treated water supply’, ‘gymnasium, sauna & jacuzzi rooms, swimming pool’ are highlighted including a small temple located at the ‘site gate’.

Construction of the apartment buildings gathered pace in the last couple of years and sales had gradually picked up and the businesses looked promising after a gradual slump since 2009 due to recession (KTM2Day, 2014). That was until the devastating earthquake of 25th April 2015 in which few highly sought after apartment buildings were destroyed beyond repair (AFP, 2015).

CONCLUSION: UNCANNY MODERNITY

The paper has described how traditional architecture in the Kathmandu Valley has become an ongoing, potent symbol of engagement with the past. Within these symbols are found traditional practices and ways of life that have evolved over many centuries. Architecture and built form has been shaped by the well-structured societal norms and religious practices, in turn helping preserve these very norms and practices to give cultural continuity. The advent of modernity, however, grounded in historic timings, has subscribed to different reference points. Modernity in residential architecture was shaped during the decades globalisation flourished with a powerful architectural vision laden with Western ideals and aesthetics. Private developers became the torchbearers to promote this vision, which was well received in the Kathmandu Valley.

Writings of the early travellers to Kathmandu Valley such as, Wright (1877) and Oldfield (1880) were dismissive of the Newar house designs, claiming them to be repetitive across the Kathmandu Valley towns. In their writings they assert as though anything different or not equivalent to the designs popular in Western countries are deemed to be inferior. Similar feelings became deeply rooted in Nepalese society, as over the years, society tried to adopt Western styles of building and architecture assuming it to be superior from the indigenous style. Bhattarai Upadhyay (2012: 170) quotes one of the current urban planning practitioners KW in the Kathmandu Valley who claims,

“there is a misconception that ...once you build with concrete your house is modern... All the legal system is based on this understanding that concrete is pukka (permanent) and non-concrete is *kacha* (impermanent)”.

This highlights the technical ignorance among the general public and the inability of the government to promote awareness in these issues; as a result, people find it easier to follow the techniques that everyone is using, thus abandoning the traditional architectural styles for imported techniques of building construction. Moreover, the contemporary professionals’ treatment of the indigenous system as inferior to the new techniques has resulted in the gradual abandonment of the traditional system.

It can be argued that the new residential architecture had an opportunity to engineer a new society keeping and enhancing some of the best architectural practice. Why Nepalese architecture could not serve as an example for the new built homes or apartments is an important question. The three decades of civil war triggered massive influx of migrants and capital offering opportunities for redevelopment and urban extensions aligned with the traditional architecture. But the sustained subscription to Westernised and globalised notions of buildings and spaces have been pervasive. These practices have steadily grown to undermine the value of historic enclaves as centres of tradition, identity and nationhood. Shrestha (1981) questioned how much of these architectural treasures could be preserved given the then pseudo-modernization. Nearly four decades later his question remains even more important as the process of transition to modernity has intensified.

The relevance of the new residential architecture should be reviewed especially in the post-disaster context and also in the context that there is acute fuel, electricity and water supply shortage throughout the year. There is a traditional Nepalese architecture and techniques better equipped to provide the much needed resilience in the city. It is a tragic paradox that the contemporary architecture in Kathmandu Valley turns its back on the very legacy that gave it an identity and survival.

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