

THREATS TO THE SPIRIT OF THE PLACE

Urban Space and Squares, Historic City Core, Kathmandu

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Abstract. The historic city core of Kathmandu consists of unique arts and architecture amidst vibrant culture, tradition and ritual practices. Its traditional compact planning is interrupted by spaces endowed with special character that they are testimony to existence and development of the spirit. But today, this spirit is missing due to its deteriorating spatial quality. There are many interlinked threats to the spirit of the space which lead to abandonment, loss of cultural heritage and sustainable practices. They eventually give rise to modernization trends which are inappropriate and incompatible. If not regulated in time, they will cause irreversible damage to the inherent spirit. At present, the focus of historic space is largely on monuments and houses but what traditional urban space needs is proper management of its uses relative to its values and time. For this, competent management and clear legal framework are required to regulate emerging challenges. Therefore, public participation, strengthening of institutional capacity and public awareness programs based on indigenous values shall be encouraged. Thereby, the traditional values are preserved and enhanced for contemporary needs and as well as for posterity. This research is based on urban space along axis linking squares of different hierarchy and accessibility, with Kathmandu Palace Square Monument Zone at the centre. The methodology consists of both theoretical and empirical findings through literature reviews, site surveys and interaction with local people and authorities.

Introduction

Heritage activities in Kathmandu city have only been limited to conservation of monuments of national importance. Spatial aspects like town level heritage, as reflected in built spaces, routes of heritage, service/community space, street, squares, have never been specifically and strategically addressed (Tiwari 2001). This is a contradiction because traditional urban form is a combination of space bounded by temples, monuments and buildings. Therefore, even though most of the monuments within Kathmandu Durbar Square are in good condition, the overall impact is not satisfactory due to ongoing spatial trends and values.

The historic core area of Kathmandu city was inscribed in UNESCO world heritage list on basis of cultural heritage criteria, III, IV and VI. The core area comprising of palaces, temples, houses belonging to 15th -18th century is known as the Kathmandu Palace Square Monument Zone. However, it is the layout of streets, squares and public space that presents the unique visual and spatial characteristics than the gigantic scale and majestic presence of those monuments, palaces and temples.

Since 1950s, the historic city core of Kathmandu is undergoing rapid urbanization. The transformation has led to loss of spatial relation, linkages and accessibility that used to exist between buildings, monuments and spaces. Hence the original diversity of urban fabric and activities is gradually disappearing. Therefore, like in many Asian cities where heritage sites are located in city center, so in Nepal also the historic city center is in critical phase of transformation. This irreversible process needs to be timely controlled or mitigated, or else original traditional forms and values will be lost forever. Therefore, the present need is to integrate preservation of historic urban space into heritage conservation.

Historical background

Kathmandu city was made capital of Nepal after unification of the nation in 1769 AD, and it was already dominant and flourishing urban center then. According to the legend, King Gunakamadeva chose the shape of a sword for city plan of Kathmandu in 724 AD, symbolizing Hindu goddess. The development of the city continued through many ruling dynasties over the centuries. During the Licchavi period (300-

800 AD), Dakshin Koligrama, the southern settlement in the south of Hanuman Dhoka was more important and densely populated than its north. It was also a famous site for holding major festivals and cultural programs. After the end of Licchavi period, Kathmandu valley remained in dark for a few centuries until the advent of the Malla period (1200-1769 AD). The Malla rulers made their palaces at the present Hanuman Dhoka area and developed it as the central seat of government and urban civic life. By the early 12th century, Daksinakoli/Yangala was known as Kasthamandapa, derived from a famous large rest-house made from wood. After the rulers from Gorkha took over the valley, they made Kathmandu city as capital of the unified nation. During this pre-modern period (1769-1950 AD), the old palace continued to be royal residence and the seat of new government and in the late 18th century they moved to a new palace. However, the old palace continued to be used for special occasions.

Spatial Concept

The city planning was based on Vaastu-Purusha Mandala, hence cosmic quality played a great role in the physical layout and planning of the city, and this is reflected in settlement planning with hierarchy of people based on caste, creed and occupations. The city was designed as a fortified city for defensive purpose, though the remains of fortification cannot be found anymore. But this can be observed during ceremonial Upaku route taken by devotees during Indrajaatra festival. Another significant element of city planning is its focus on sustainable development based on natural limits of environment, land and geography (Gutschow 1982).

Spatial Characteristics

Traditional urban space and civic amenities like mandapa, sattal, dabali, water structures and pillars were special features of medieval city planning. They also developed Guthis system which was public or private trust based on occupational castes. The Guthis used to have fund in form of land and money available from donations to provide funding for social service and repair/maintenance of civic buildings and amenities. Some important spatial elements are as listed below:

Streets & Squares: They are categorized into 3 types according to socio-spatial order. Squares are nodal points found at junction of two or more streets.

Performance platform or Dabali: It is a raised platform usually built near temples in squares or inside royal palace and used as open-air stages for religious dance, dramas, display of images of gods and royal functions. According to historian Satya Mohan Joshi, theatrical traditions in Nepal started with the dabali. Till today, many dramatic dances, rituals are performed in dabali during festivals (Pokharel 2008).

Public rest house, water structures: Public rest houses were built by wealthy family or religious groups to provide shelter to pilgrims, travelers and traders. They also serve as social space to interact, work and rest. Water structures are built adjacent to socio-religious structures, such as pond, fountain, Dhungedhara (water spouts).

Spatial Transformation

The Kathmandu city retained its medieval character until pre-modern period but the onset of haphazard urbanization brought tremendous changes. Townscape analysis was made to assess changes in term of legibility, permeability and visual analysis of the traditional urban fabric with case study focused on Kathmandu Durbar Square Monument Zone (Moughtin et al. 1999).

Legibility: It is concerned with image and quality of traditional cities. Today legibility of traditional space is threatened by inappropriate and incompatible modern activities. For instance: the local people say that Basantpur Square was a site for several monasteries before the earthquake in 1934 AD. Later, it was built as raised platform and known as Basantpur dabali, and the remains of monastery are still found in eastern corner. The dabali is now used as curio shopping area and for religious functions related to the Living Goddess (Kumari bahal). The wide road towards its north is important route during Bahi dyo and festival. But according to survey on uses of buildings, mixed use is predominant and shops are mainly for tourists. This increased commercialization has resulted in loss of original symmetry and harmony in the physical environment of Basantpur square. To its west lies Maru tole which was once a renowned southern city. Kasthamandapa, Simha sattal, Maru Ganesh, Kavindrapur, Gakuti are some of its popular landmarks. Traditionally

it is a popular market square for local people that even now municipality allows small shops selling flowers, vegetables, fruits for a few hours every day. But some street-vendors remain illegally creating disturbance and pollution. Similarly, the Palace square consists of famous traditional trade route linking northern and southern parts of the city. Taleju temple, Kal Bhairav, Seto Bhairav, Layaku bahi, Taleju Drums, Pratapdhvaj pillar and palace complex are some of its major landmarks. The dabalis were guarded against misuse and only allowed during cultural programs until pre-modern period. But present trends of commercial urbanization are threatening the spirit of the area. There are some historic areas to its west called Kot and Majakdeval, which are the location of royal conference hall and medieval temple respectively. Now, they are occupied by official buildings, which are incompatible in their scale, design and use in relation to the significance of the historic site. Moreover, they have also encroached upon dabali and temple in the vicinity.

Traditionally, streets are like networks for interaction of societies and exhibition of public life. But now, they are simplified tools for transportation and seem to have lost a meaningful stage for public life (Cupers et al 2002). This trend is more obvious in the context of Maru tole, where the pattern of movement used to be mainly pedestrian with active socio-cultural and commercial uses. As this area is central junction of many roads, vehicular traffic is heavy creating chaos for pedestrians, shoppers and people driving vehicle themselves. Moreover, this area has numerous heritage elements in close proximity that many shrines, and monuments remain neglected around or below road level. For instance, an open shrine in front of Kasthamandapa now has only a marking left with few ruined sculptures. People and vehicles pass over it unaware of its existence and significance. Similar situation exists with a wide central road with sloping ends to provide for smooth movement of religious chariots in the Palace square but now its traditional use is deteriorating.

Permeability: It is concerned with levels of uses, ownership, accessibility and hierarchical layout of urban spaces. Traditional urban spaces were highly accessible, that circulation network used to follow residential courtyards and ground floor of houses. Similarly, amenities, monuments and buildings were also public. Only residential quarters were private, and the privacy zone increased vertically with successive upper floors while ground floor remained semi public or public domain. Now, this higher permeability of public

spaces and buildings is reduced, for security reasons or private gains. For instance: in some residential locality, the local residents put barrier to street or courtyard access to control unwanted movement or vehicle in their community space. Similarly almost all public buildings at Maru tole were once accessible to public for socio-cultural and religious uses. Now, they are inaccessible because of restriction from so called private owners or Guthis who now use them for their private benefits through commercial or residential uses. Now, public spaces like Simha sattal and Laxmi Narayan sattal are in a state of decay due to inactivity and lack of care and maintenance. Therefore, proper orientation and management of activities are needed for preserving and enhancing values of the space.

Visual analysis: It is concerned with spatial characteristics defined by height, volume, scale and symmetry of street elevations. According to existing bylaws for monument zones, the mass volume of buildings must be compatible with existing historic buildings and surroundings. Similarly, the scale, height and proportion of main façade must be in harmony with surrounding streetscape. As observed on site, the spatial planning is still maintained to some extent but the height of buildings enclosing urban space is increasing vertically. Moreover, monuments and public buildings have maintained the original skylines and volumetric character, but for private buildings, it is opposite. The dominant buildings of modern and mix styles are mostly built against bylaws of Monument Zone. Therefore, the increasing height and change in styles are discontinuation from original styles and skylines and such kinds of vertical expansion decreases utility of the open spaces leading to reduced values and livability of space.

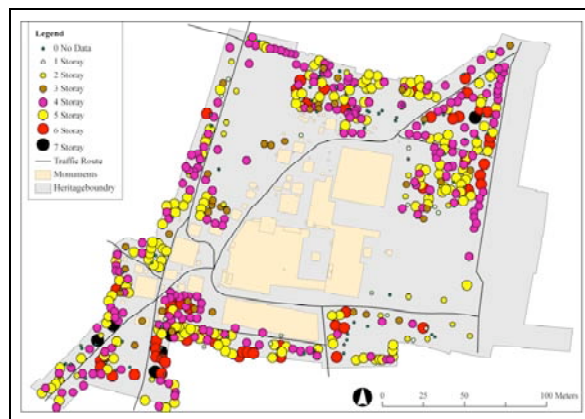


Figure 1. Mapping based on number of storeys

Changing trends

The spatial transformation has resulted in changing trends in pattern of movement, activities and identity with time.

Movement pattern: The traditional street planning used to follow functional as well religious order, to facilitate the peoples’ day to day and ritual activities related to their worship of gods. But now they are used for increased vehicular traffic and parking in haphazard manner. Therefore, accidents due to falling of chariots during festivals are very common now, as original chariot tracks and paving/finish level are either no longer maintained or destroyed by heavy traffic.

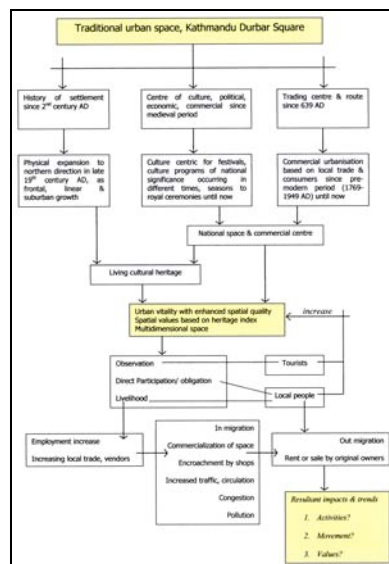


Figure 2. Trends in traditional urban space

Uses and activities: The current socio-economic trends have affected traditional system. One is the growth of nuclear families over traditional joint family system leading to division of single family house among its family members. Most of them sell/ rent or abandon their traditional house to live outside the city core, that these houses lose their historic values due to ignorance or lack of interest among new owners. Moreover, tourism industry and commercial urbanization have also increased commercial activities. The concerned authority under the Local Self-governance Act 1999 can take action against any activity disturbing the existing environment but the management is not effective and the situation continues to be chaotic.

Identity: The inner city area is developing fast and attracting more business and employment to the city center. Thus, the residential pattern of Kathmandu city is changing with emerging residential mix of poor and rich in both core and outer areas. This has done away with the earlier settlement planning based on social segregation of castes and religions. In addition, the land value is very high in the core area due to its high commercial land use. Therefore, the owners either rent to business houses for commercial purpose (shop, store) or dismantle completely to make viable modern commercial complexes. Therefore, the identity of city core is changing from culture centric distinct into business centric district.

Threats to spatial values

On the basis of changing trends due to spatial transformation, issues that are threats to spatial values are listed below (Tiwari 2001):

- Commercialization is a threat to traditional urban fabric as it causes drastic changes in land uses, functional and cultural values.
- Modern society is less sensitive and enthusiastic to heritage value.
- Low level of awareness leads to deteriorating situations of cultural infrastructures, such as loss of ambient visual environment, traditional open space accompanied by other physical environmental problems. Consequently, this affects the total physical living environment.
- Lack of research and inventory on intangible heritage leads to the loss of originality during reconstruction/ conservation works.
- Lack of coordination in plans, programs and responsibilities among public authorities, governmental departments and stakeholders, which results in outputs that are ineffective, lacking long term and holistic approach.

Goals and challenges

Transition implies transformation in local context such as historical, political and structural conditions. During the process of transition, efforts to develop sustainability are being repressed by economic aspects that the triangle is no longer in balance (Stadelbauer 2006). Similar situation is happening in Kathmandu city core. Due to increased globalization of retail trade and industries, the city core is attracting more investors, consumers and immigrants, as evident in

increased density of resident population within Kathmandu inner city wards with average 2.4% per annum for the period of 1981 to 1991 (Central Bureau of Statistics 2007). The current trend of precedence of economic interests over traditional values is changing the mentality and values of society. Now, many local people regard traditional space and values as hindrance to their modern life. Consequently, their interests and commitment towards guthis and socio-cultural practices are also decreasing. The current challenges are to provide sustained economic growth and improved quality of habitable environment, and these issues need the following immediate actions:

- Pedestrianization of heritage streets
- Rehabilitation of public buildings
- Improvement of physical environment
- Revitalization of inner-city traditional commercial center
- Mobilization of local people and organizations

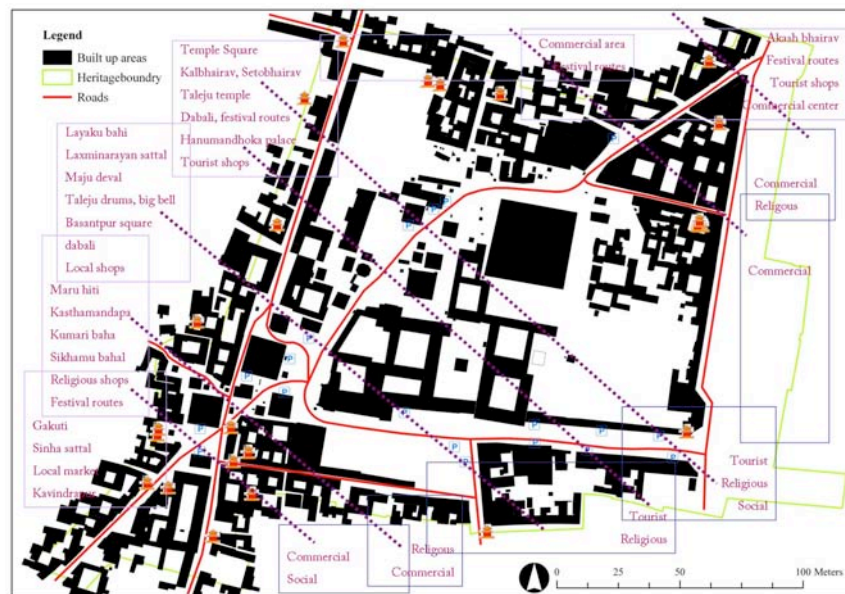


Figure 3. Conflicts in values and uses

These measures should follow strategy of sustainable urban development to create healthy, balanced living cultural heritage city. In addition, spatial values are defined by both tangible and intangible heritage. The intangible heritage is the society, its cultural lifestyles and community values. Therefore, local communities should be

directly involved, which can be grouped into three categories: One group is the local residents and formal commercial sector whose interest lie with improvement of physical conditions and restoration of original values of locality; Second group is the migrant workers living in degraded conditions in core area whose interests lie with reform activities that assure them better opportunities and income; and finally is the third group of public authorities concerned with future development of the areas. Efforts shall be made to coordinate and balance these different interests to resolve the problems. Accordingly, strategies of revitalization of space shall be planned, such as mitigation, replacement, control or regeneration. The realization of these goals requires improvement of set of actions such as economic condition, social condition and urban planning (Secretaria Municipal de Planejamento Urbano 2004). Therefore, management of public infrastructure and urban space has to be undertaken as part of local economic development and urban regeneration.

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