

City Space and Life then, 150 years ago

- A presentation of concept and realities

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Introduction:

Dr. H. Ambrose Oldfield visited and stayed in Nepal in the first half of nineteenth century. On exhibition is what he saw. These collection of sketches show facets of our town that is difficult to imagine these days. So much of changes have happened in the past one hundred and fifty years. But this is how our great grandfathers lived, may be we could find him among the tiny carefree tots, wondering what was in store for him and his grand children in these towns. Wonder of wonders, he could have hardly imagined

- Instead of vegetables and rice grown at their own farms being marketed at the Durbar square, there would be handicraft peddlers and his own square would look like it belonged more people like that white man with water colors;
- That the bull would no longer rest in the squares and the streets and the people would be consigned to the narrow plinths on the sides as the all powerful motor vehicles would colonize both;
- That his grand children would build houses taller than the abodes of the Gods and like the dirty drain, the sky would also be made so dirty that he would not see the backdrop of the temple roofs and hillcrests in the horizon.
- That oil of the wick lamps would be replaced by something called electricity and his town would look as if a wire mesh was spread over it.
- that the chariots of the Gods would come around only as if to fulfill a chore and many of his children would see that as a nuisance in darkness, caused by the removal of main strings of the wiremesh;
- And that ... we could go on and on.

As it is the life of that great grand father was slowly adjusting to the town, which was suffering from results of another kind of change at that moment. Drains had gone

unattended for years. Temples and Bahals were falling apart. Poverty, particularly at the community level, was debilitating and many *Guthis* had gone as *birta* of the new gentry. His thoughts would probably make him imagine the lovely days of his own grandfather...in those days gone by when his town was rich and was a center of the cosmos, as it were. Everything had fitted to a socio-religious scheme of themes and work and working environment of the residents, and, Gods and their reflections of heavenly cycles of time and seasonality of Nature were mirrored by the use of spaces. Those days would have appeared a little less unreal to him as Oldfield's sketches appear out of the world to us today.

The Planning and Design of the town, spaces and uses:

Having said that much, a look at the planning and design of the town, urban spaces and their use, would be useful in helping us understand the sketches and our towns as they were actually lived in its hay days.

Were these towns planned? Often, we are misguided by a thought that planning of a town is regular patterning of roads and conclude that traditional sectors of our town are unplanned. There should be no doubt that form of our traditional towns is a result of organic growth over tens and tens of generations. Yet they are not as disorganized as Baneswor, which is just a result of one generation of autonomous owner building activity. Baneswor is unplanned, not because it is amorphous or shapeless, but because it is wasteful and inefficient, it aggrandizes the private spaces and demeans the public ones, it shuns community living, it defeats movement, it is a cultural desert etc. etc. We find our traditional towns at the opposite end of Baneswor if we apply the same criteria. There was a unifying planning thought at work. Only having been developed for the man, in his natural mode of movement, that of walking, and only because circumstances have forced the pedestrian to a backward position, there would be hardly sufficient reasons to call our traditional towns unplanned or haphazard. That town was planned with priority of location for Gods and ritual festivals mediated circulation. The failure of the latter at the hands of material economy has also made out towns look quaint and unplanned.

The Planning:

Belaboring the issue of planning and planned towns a little bit further, let's look at this term called 'jaat', which is often, sometimes even by ourselves, mistakenly associated as a function of religion or 'touchability / untouchability'. Jaat structure is a result of occupation based division of society and 'jaat' is, above all, just a job indicator. For the largest section of the society 'jaat' had a horizontal structure. It had acquired strong vertical stratification traits for small section of population at the top and the bottom. From the perspective of building block of a town, it is indeed amazing to find the palace of the most powerful kingdom of the valley, the Patan Durbar, neither striving for height, nor for ceremonial approaches. The social status was just a function apparently of location, carved embellishments, size of square and number of temples therein. The dispersal of 'jaats' in the town was directly based on 'proximity priority related to frequency of consultation' by the palace or the state.

The most amazing planning thought applied in our traditional towns could be termed 'zoning by jaat', which at once ensured survival of the profession, reduced intra-town movement (concept of work place at home) and allowed growth of localized 'homogeneous communities'. The idea of locating small domestic industries together, which was practiced in our towns, is these days theorized in planning as required and logical for sustainability of small businesses and industries, achieving what is called 'scale effect'. What we see so plainly happening naturally (cf. hardware shops at Teku or tourists handicrafts stalls at Svayambhu), our forefathers were deliberately zoning. The latter is just an economic activity zone, whereas the former was a social, cultural and economic zoning applied together through 'jaat' consideration.

This concept was so scrupulously followed that two of the jaats who were pushed to the periphery found themselves outside the town walls, as medieval turbulence led the later Mallas to build defense walls around their town.

Another interesting aspect of the Malla town was application of the cosmic image to the town. Borrowing from Vedic traditions and supplemented by Shakti cult, the towns were overlaid with a ritual based planning structure. Planners today would dispute that the success or acceptance of a plan depends most on how well it addresses the most widely accepted values of the society. The Malla town planners, *Guvajus (?)*, thought best to use the ritual basis – for a society steeped in religion this would almost look natural. Thus the Durbar Square became home of the key gods from all cults current in the society. Krishna, Vishnu, Vidhyadevi (Tripurasundari), Taleju, Degutaleju, Karunamaya, Siva all came to cluster around the king. The Durbar Square, something that was not there in the Lichchhavi period, had come into being. Likewise, town periphery was defined not by the walls but by the peripheral gods, such as the Matrikas and other protectors of directions. This concept of ‘a balanced and whole cosmic image’ was applied down to individual elements, leading to the incorporation of the cult images in each Tole, mainly survived by the common and the strong ones such as Nriteswora, Ganesh or the Chaitya these days. Wide application of such concepts, led to the development of ‘jaat’ specific community spaces, squares and courts, interspersed in town. Town planning by-laws were thus mediated by Religious Rituals and hardly any one dared to encroach these ‘rules’. Without any ‘Town Planning Office’, our ‘planners’ were able to assure continued health of the town over time. Indeed the town form and structure was never challenged, until the Gods themselves started losing their power. At the time Oldfield visited, the people had already discovered that one would get away even after perpetrating indignities against Gods. The down fall of the Ritual Town had started.

The Design:

When talking about design of spaces, two aspects come immediately to the fore, pedestrian scale of design and superb community spaces distributed around town. Both the aspects made the town respond and belong to communities rather than individuals. Oldfield’s sketches illustrate these aspects quite well. (Here we might need to apply some correction to Oldfields’ anthropometry! His human figures are scaled down, possibly a result of his residual visual experience of monumentalism of Victorian towns at work).

Temples and squares were all open, illicit trading of God images had yet to begin. The spaces still belonged to the people and their Gods each enlivening the other. The Kumari Chowk of Bhaktapur was not yet closed and the high *fales* served the boy well. Oldfield's sketches only shows the military adventurism of Bhimsen Thapa, Dharahara, which Oldfield, in classic display of the Empire's dislike, dubs as "Bhimsen's Folly", guarded and closed. The belongingness of the immediate community to the space amid their midst is well exhibited by the uninhibited bather of Pimbahal or the vegetable seller of the Lagan Bahal or the picnickers at Bagh Bhairava. The familiarity to each other in the community seemingly widened the 'personal defensible space' to cover the whole Tole.

Pedestrian Scale:

Our towns exhibit a grand sense of a scale; they are not just anthropometrically human but also designed for the pedestrian. The pace of pedestrian movement, capable of savoring details, was responded with plain surfaced buildings embellished with minutely detailed windows. Wherever the sun could play with the shadows, such as in the upper floors and at wider squares, *Viman and San* windows or the projecting roofs and recessed walls of the public buildings such as temples, it was allowed to create a show of light and shadows. The streets themselves narrowed and widened, a great design feature, breaking monotony and bringing personality into the place. Movement could be peppered with little sojourns for heavenly or worldly merits in communion with Gods or friends. The street became much more than a street and the window was much more than a *Silpakar's* expression.

Oldfield's sketches do not show a single vehicle. The wheels were known but the buggies were at Thapathali, Dharahara and Hanumandhoka areas. The town spaces do not even show a single horse or elephant. The street was a wholly pedestrian affair. A bull or a goat only sometimes shared them. One may also be impressed by the low intensity of use even as a pedestrian artery (See the Mahalaxmi Dyochhen at Bhaktapur as an illustration).

Community Spaces:

In the old scheme of spaces in the town, one could still notice and enjoy at least three kinds of spaces, Nodal places, Street spaces created by varying widths and Bahal spaces. The Bahals, having been subjected to a fresh wave of Hindu overlordism, by the time of Oldfield's visit, were already in the process of transforming themselves from religious spaces to "workshops of the Bajracharya and Sakyas clans". Two of the major Durbar Squares had lost their kings and cosmic image and transformed themselves into peoples' space. It had become a market square, which in its hey days would have been unthinkable. Oldfield's Patan Durbar and Bhaktapur Durbar sketches illustrate this change quite well.

Nodal spaces were characterized by informality and space-forming elements were dispersed to introduce an element of surprise to the moving viewer. Unexpectedly large or small temples would spring back from behind to make one look up the sky or a deep stone water conduit pit could draw one downwards. There were at least three variations:

- Nodal spaces: informal & element of surprise
 - Central: cosmic and state center : Royals and Nobles mix: others welcome
 - Intermediate: Market and social center: Higher Jaats & Nobles mix: (Sundhara as sketched by Oldfield, Swotha, Nagabahal) hierarchical restrictions
 - Interior/ Peripheral: Market and/or social center specific to cults (Chysal, Tyagal, Kumveswora, Pimbaha as sketched by Oldfield, Ebaha, etc)
 - Semi private: extended families

Street was more than just a movement artery for pedestrians. It also doubled up as an activity space. So much so that they linked it to the insides of the house, so to speak, not only by the building design element of the Dalan but also by Windows that faced down to the street. The house and the street were quite clearly intended to interact visually as well as physically.

- Street as space:
 - activity corridor: the way the town was planned generated limited movement within as a result of tertiary functions: workplace at home for most 'jaats'
 - streets to take daily movement to the farms: a finger pattern: also caused limited day use of the house/ commercial function limited to 'highways'
 - streets for occasional specialized movements
 - movement of the gods: annual, four yearly, twelve yearly
 - movement of the humans
 - life cycle rituals: birth, coming of age, marriage, 1000 moons, death

The third space of the Bahal, a predominant feature particularly of the town of Patan, was another type greatly affected by the changes. From guarded spaces for rituals and learning of particular religious groups of the Bajracharyas and the Sakyas, it was turning over into residential workspaces for them. Only a few of the Sakya Sanghas, apparently as sketched by Oldfield, continued to put up a brave face. The spaces had lost their closed look.

Building Design and the Dalan

The towns' spaces of Kathmandu valley towns display remarkable design intent to support public life. As a matter of fact, our traditional building design and form appear more a result of attempts to create 'space on the outside' rather than interior spaces. Our buildings fall into that marvelous category of buildings, which S. Giedion would probably say, lies in the transition stage between 'buildings as volumes radiating spaces' and 'buildings as interiors'. Interior space was required, but our architecture seems as though even interior had an 'exterior motive'. Our traditional architects must be credited for the singular achievement of creating Dalans. Yet Dalan is only an example. There are other features like fales or falechas, Patis and Sattals, Chowks and Chukas etc. etc.

Urban centers have been known in the west to encourage and support impersonal relationships and planners worry that it may be a character of the urban center itself. Yet here in the valley's traditional towns, intimate community relationship and community life was a hallmark. There was nothing like a formal space here— every space encouraged and supported informal use. Would you believe that the set of timber benches, foles, lining the outside of Keshav Mohan Chowk are designed and placed exactly as it was during the assignment of Oldfield to Nepal? Was it not inviting people to come to the palace and relax watching the birds play in and around Krishna Mandir? And this feature is seen in the palace of the richest city kingdom of Kathmandu, controlling all of the southern stretches of the valley with its northern borders along Hanumante, Bagmati and Balkhu!

Changes over the last one hundred and fifty years ago:

The changes over the period have been so extensive that it would be difficult to imagine the past, since we live today having pushed the pedestrian to the corner in difference to motor vehicles. Gods have to move around in festivals today well in the day so that the electric lines may be restored for the night and joy of men. When the Buggys come out, it is as if to create traffic jams, in marriages. When the uncaparisoned elephants of the zoo comes out, it is only to tear down some lonely Pipul tree.

But there is one aspect one could imagine quite easily about life in our towns then. The poverty of the people (and Oldfield added 'which was even greater than their piety') Imagine Nepal with exchange rate of Rs. 100 to a Pound and the monthly earnings of a 'jagir of a few Ropanis of land'. No foreign goods, no Taiwan dresses, only the locally woven clothes and style. Agro-based product exchange dominated the urban market scene. There were no 'tourists' and no handicraft peddlers. The now lost community wealth and the guthis made many of the public structures crumble and at least in this aspect, we see the process merrily continuing even today. The clogged and dirty drains are with us as much as they were there at that time.

The concept of the city-state, a coincidental development of the late Malla period (since about AD 1480) had come and gone. A centralized power system was in place. Some very old people, who had seen the change happen as the Shahs came to town were still alive to tell the stories or living a make believe life in the older pattern. They would stories about each and every public building and temples were provided for their maintenance and operation in the past. The wealth of these temples was gone. Instead there were bullet holes, swords and shields remaining as memories. The days of sacrificing big buffaloes so that their horns could be proudly displayed on the temple posts and *toranas* were also fading into memories.

But the air was still clean and the presence of nature as the backdrop of urban scenery was quite enticing. Even the brick kilns were without chimneys and gave off straw smoke laden with moisture.

Life was leisurely and the town provided for it quite well. You could even go for a family outing to a nearby square and feel at home.

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