

## **Cities as Repository of Vernacular Traditions; Himalayan Settlements of India and Nepal**

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### **Abstract**

The paper argues that the city with its spatial structure, rich representation and imagination is an important repository of vernacular traditions.

The idea of a city as a cultural product is perhaps the most important overarching concept that has been deconstructed in the context of Himalayan region in the paper. The idea of a city as an anti-thesis to the wild nature around but with a certain reference to the unique cultural landscape of the region has been elaborated upon through case studies. This overarching attitude to “nature” as reflected in the city form is perhaps the fundamental repository of vernacular tradition of space making that informs and influences the practices at all scale right down to the building and objects of daily use. The fundamental relationship with land and water gets very well expressed in spatial terms in regions like Himalayas and has an impact on how other material culture (including architecture) are conceived. The structure and form of the public places (commons) is perhaps the most immediate expression at human scale that embodies the traditional ideas of vernacular space making. The particular idea of public space, which is unique to the Himalayas, has been shown through drawings and analysis. The point being that public (community) spaces are the most important reference and embodiment of ideas of vernacular tradition of organizing space. This is demonstrated through the study of various Himalayan cities in India and Nepal like Leh, Mustang, Almora and Patan.

## Background

The narrative around Himalayas and its cities gives us an interesting insight into the perception of this geography in popular culture of the Indian sub-continent. In most Hindu epic text, Himalayas are often described as the abode of God. A land far removed from the worldly existence, pure, sacred and disconnected. This cultural idea of the Himalayas can be understood in some specific ways here. It seems the geographical space of the Himalayas is almost considered to be an anti-thesis to the very idea of a material city. A place not for humans but for God, non-polluted by the humans and disconnected from the flows of the world. The Himalayan space of habitation is considered to be one with nature, forest, springs and rivers. The idea of the Himalayas in the subcontinent is an important one for defining the plains themselves. The Himalayas as seen to protect and nourish the plain below; both physically and culturally, but at the same time being the inversion of the worldly ways; a retreat for the ascetic, asylum for the wanderer and the renounces

The western folklore often associated the idea of "lost" and exotic "Shangri-La" to the region of Himalayas and Tibet [1]. A place comparable to "Garden of Eden", where all wishes come true and people are immortal. This again is a complete anti-thesis to the material and mortal world we inhabit. The idea of a city in Himalayas seems to connote a contrast with those of the other places. There is definitely an idea of purity and uniqueness associated with these settlements in the popular culture.

*Is there something about the landscape of Himalayas that allows us to make such connections?*

## The idea of landscape in Himalayas

Material cultures like architecture, public places and cities are perceived to exist in a particular landscape context. Landscape is seen as a setting for the material culture of the place. However the paper takes a premise that landscape condition of an area (region or immediate surrounding) where the city exists, is not only a background setting but rather fundamental factor in shaping the culture of the place including material ones [2]

To understand the uniqueness of the settlements in the Himalayas it is important to first understand the landscape of its existence. The hills and especially the Himalayan Mountains have a unique physical landscape condition that first needs to be understood in order to further decipher the cities there. The Himalayas range run east to west (some 2400 km's) and the basic formation of the ranges is such that it drains major river systems of South Asia. The rivers that start from the glacier of the melting snow at the higher altitude, leads to formation of valleys and ridges. The particular formation is one of the most important features that have a profound impact on subsequent human activities and settlements. Almost all settlements exist in some valley of the river or streams

The valley as a geographical entity becomes the container that at surface seems pretty self-contained and physically well defined. Unlike the plains, a valley system has extremely strong landscape references. The landscape of the Himalayas is unique in each space with specific site circumstances. The situation of the valley, the contours, the water and the vegetation together seem to form a strong and unique condition. It is not generic like the plains; rather it is specific to the place. So the architectural expression has to be sited extremely well; it has to be sure and specific. There is no second chance as land is at a premium and nor a possibility to grow with time beyond a point. For examples settlements in plains expand, reach out and morph with time due to the immense flexibility that the landscape offer and also as societies go through dramatic changes. Here in the hills, there is no such physical luxury hence the physical expression of human endeavor (architecture cities and public places) comes out as being fixed and not changeable over time

### Cities of Valleys

The landscape condition of area in and around the cities in hills is way different and unique. There is no idea of infinite resources as in the plains. Whereas in the plains the idea of infinity or the world beyond horizon is the one to be explored, plundered and occupied. In the hills the natural resources are rich but limited, the physical world has a limit. The city acts as the repository of the surplus of the region of valleys and hence the river and the valleys become the domain that are to be respected, understood and worked with. It is difficult to break this domain of the landscape condition.

*There is hardly any possibility for different landscape interpretation. The water gushes from the higher to lower level, brings in mud and rocks in monsoon, humans can only walk where the land is gentle enough to not toss them off their feet, crops can only grow in terraces possible in certain slopes, the winter months are harsh as there is no firewood and food, so communities must store in advance, it takes days to cross one valley to another and there the water tastes different, the mountains are of different color, the river path are not the same and it feels same, bit distinctively different as well.*

More importantly the surplus of one valley cannot be physically brought to another valley; it can only go down to other settlements in the same valley. So the city in a mountain is bound to a valley and a river. The valley both protects and restricts. The world beyond cannot be captured but the only way it can be understood is through trade. Often the settlement lie on the dry ridges commanding view of both sides of the valley. This ways these settlements are on firmer ground not prone to landslide and are able to use flat ground for common activities. See figure 1 showing the smaller settlements in Kathmandu valley and Figure 2 showing the position of Patan town. It is clear that there is a specific attitude towards sitting of the settlements with respect to the protruded ridges. So how does the unique geography impact the way material and other culture are shaped over a period of time?

### Spatial Mental Constructs: Orientation and Direction

The formation of a valley is a direct result of the flow of water from higher to lower altitudes. The flow of the river from the glaciers above to the plains below is the first and amongst the strongest physical reality that needs to be acknowledged in the landscape. The fact that one is always near flowing water, that is making its way from the higher to the lower ground is fundamental reality that cannot be denied in a valley, and also in its cities or outside it. The human constructs of both orientation (locating one self) and direction then becomes the function of the flow of water. The direction of the flow of the river tells a very important story. It locates us as we realize the higher slopes above and the lower ones below; giving a sense of direction and hence orientation. Unlike the plain where the sun and the horizon play an important role in orienting the human mind, in the hills it is the flow of the water that helps us read the landscape thereby creating a strong physical sense of direction.

The valley with its upper and lower areas becomes a kind of container that creates a spatial realm that is partially isolated from adjacent valleys. The natural connection of the valley will be either to the higher passes and the "land beyond" or lower down to the plains (see section on Trade Routes, Open Grounds and Markets for discussion on the same). This is where the role of the routes that connects the cities of the valley from the plains below and others beyond the high passes becomes important. It is not surprising that most valleys in the Himalayas have traditionally demonstrated a distinct identity that is both social as well as political.

### Cultural identities of valleys

The Himalayas are understood through valleys in popular and traditional perceptions. For example; the Kullu valley with its unique religious-cultural features and the Solan Sulej valley for its unique tribal culture. Valley is the dominant cultural division in the hills. It touches areas of lower altitude and subsequently connects with the plains and the many worlds there as much it connects through a single trade route to the world beyond in its outer reaches through the no-mans land.

The myths and legends of a place are often restricted to a particular valley and do not extend to the adjacent valleys. For example the nature and ideas of certain belief system within the state of Himachal Pradesh like festivals and rituals can greatly vary from Kullu valley to another (Like the Dusshera festival of Kullu valley). The unique cultural identity of the valley is further expressed and reinforced by presence of local deities that are space specific. For example Shringi Rishi is the ruling deity of Banjar valley and Raghunath is the one of Kullu valley. The concept of preferred ruling deity itself establishes the perception of unique valleys identity. The Kullu Dusshera festival becomes the moment when the entire local valley Gods are invited. This festival unifies the varied identities of the different places in Himachal area. The cities then become a much stronger face of these valleys. They are not merely cities of a vast overlapping region with generic universal identity but rather spots of urbanity of usually unique geographical and cultural space with clear physical references such as rivers, mountain peaks and meadows.

So does a Himalayan city signify in its spatial construct's the symbolism of the "local" much more than the universal?

### The fixed physical and the abstract universal

The above discussions on the unique landscape setting (valley-river systems) of the Himalayan cities poses interesting question from the point of view of the expression of material culture of the place. Does the strong and specific landscape condition, which results in specific mental constructs of orientation and space lead to spatial constructs that are specific or generic? And more importantly does the spatial expressions of these cities rely on more physical and legible expressions or are they more abstract and non-legible ones?

Looking at many Himalayan cities it is very clear that the expressions of architecture and public places emerge very clearly (legibility) and are physically direct. See figure 3 showing the public place and palace in town of Mandi in Himachal Pradesh in India and figure 4 showing the same for Patan

*It seems that the idea of the "universal" in terms of knowledge systems, religious symbolism and ritual is less pronounced in the Himalayas. The connectedness with the physical space is much stronger as the societies (civilization) never really developed strong non-physical ideas of the city - like a complex knowledge- religious- transcendental ideas that are shared in a city. For example an over riding mythological- religious existence of a city or city that justifies its existence to the elaborate knowledge domains that are shared like crafts, science or traditional engineering*

Unlike the cities of the plains below, the hill settlement usually do not possess an elaborate political- economic systems to create surplus and get the city running which has to depend upon on complex abstract idea of a city rather than a physical ones alone. However an exception has to be made for the Buddhist Monastic settlements of the Himalayas (mainly trans- Himalayas), where the universal ideas of religion and that of the monastery might ideally become the key influences of the material expressions in the cities

An examination of the main public spaces of the Himalayan cities (composed of ground, market and palace) leads to some very interesting findings and corroborates the idea of legible and strong physical spatial expressions.

### **The Human Constructs: Routes, Grounds and Markets**

The trade routes hold a very special place in the perception of the Himalayan region and its cities. Due to the physical isolation of cities in Himalayas the trade routes become the tenacious connection with the world outside. Towards the downstream the trade route acts as collectors bringing with them various traders from the plains and different regional influences and towards the top beyond the passes they connect the valley to the world beyond the Himalayas (Tibet) or to the highway of the world (the silk route).

The cities often have a road that passes through to these trade routes as a reminder to the connection with the world beyond. The city sees itself lying on a route. This perception is further reinforced by presence of open grounds in the city that are occupied by traders and their animals and now perhaps replaced by trucks. In towns that have arisen on ideas of trade, the physical fabric displays and symbolizes these connections with the outer world much more prominently like the Market and the open spaces in cities like Leh, Chamba, Patan, Kathmandu [3] and Mandi right in the center of the town. See figure 5 showing the section of the palace and open ground in the town of Mandi

These markets are very different from the ones that are there in other parts of the town. They are not specialized but rather are full of the “exotics” from different lands; The Chinese goods from Tibet, the *masalas* from South India or DVD players from the towns of the plains. The market and the open ground together give a feel of temporariness with loose definition of spaces allowing for flexible interpretation; informal markets by visiting traders, space to organize goods, ground for fair etc. The open ground in the center of the city along with the market is an important symbol of the connection of the city with a very different world outside and far away

*Trade also brings about new ideas in cities like presence of strangers, marriages outside the caste domain or settlers from different lands. Trade led to a kind of cosmopolitan society from medieval times. Leh is a very good example of a city that has people from different ethnic origins that have made the city their home. Afghani, Kashmiri, Punjabi, Tibetan, Balati, Persian to name a few. The very notion of a city gets transformed in a social setting that includes lot of local groups but also many settlers who slowly become naturalized to the place. Often on the fringe of the city or its market places one finds many shops that cater to the specific needs of the other communities of the cities thereby symbolizing the cosmopolitan nature of the city.*

### **The Secularization of the open space**

The open ground and the market are usually to be found at an important junction of the city; the place where the trade route (connection with the world beyond) meets the local movement system (immediate connection that are mediated mainly through water). The place where these two disparate systems of movement meet is often the place where in many medieval cities the palace complex building sits adjacent to the open ground. In most of the well-formed cities, the palace and the open ground together complete the idea of the open public place.

The prominent position of the palace as viewed from the open space is an important gesture to not only reinforce the idea of power but also as it creates a contemporary idea of a secular public space. The very idea of a city is often symbolized through such spaces. The

presence of the palace building, that symbolizes the idea of centralized system (administration and politics) that is over-arching and which also helps in stitching various different identities of region and ethnicity, is an important condition in imagination of a city. The palaces and the allied institutions like courts (in case of Mandi), water tanks (in case of Patan and Kathmandu) become non-communal gesture that support the idea of a secular space. The presence of temple notwithstanding the character of most of such spaces is such that it often symbolizes secular ideas of place.

It is not surprising that even today, these particular spaces are some of the most important public places of the city that function as its center. The Chogan of Chamba, Durbar Square of Kathmandu valley cities or the garden and sunken market of Mandi function as very important public places even today. The feel or rather the symbolic identity of the city seems to emerge from these spaces. The idea of a city that is built through human will and constructs emerges very strongly in such space through its inclusive, cosmo-political nature at one hand and material legibility of its open space and public building on the other.

### **Balance with Nature: The circulation of Water and Community Places**

There seems to be a relationship between circulation of water and movement pattern of people in most areas of the hills. Pedestrian trails often run parallel to water system, gently negotiating the contours. A study of settlements around the Kathmandu valley revealed a pattern that was usually observed as extension of the core of the cities or as connectors between two settlements. These were generally linear strips like development of houses with a road in between and more often than not it was parallel to a water streams moving from higher to lower level. Since such settlements are linear, there is a limit to their growth. But what is most interesting in these settlements is an idea of the front, which is the public face of the built form and the backside, which is personal private and negotiates with the natural condition of slopes towards the water source. This negotiation of the back of the built fabric is in form of private yards, agriculture fields and orchards. The conditions is important for conceptual understanding as linear strips of built form that position itself in cusp of the two very distinct realms of nature on one side and man made movement corridor on the other. This seems to be a very common phenomenon in much hill valley condition but a very important one for understanding larger towns that expanded to cover such linear strips<sup>i</sup>. If we were to look for similar characteristics in Patan (another Kathmandu valley city) it becomes difficult to read historic patterns of either movement of water or roads in a densely packed fabric. To understand the role of water (both surface and underground) a contour slope analysis was carried out on the topography of Patan town. See figure 6. The red lines indicate ridges and with blue ones indicate the valleys and flow of surface water during monsoon period.

Further correlation of this water movement with the settlement and existing road condition leads to interesting results. Most of the road towards the north and eastern sides of the sloping part outside the core run parallel to the water streams that were identified through the slope analysis. It is very clear that the movement routes are a direct response to the topographical condition on the eastern edge of the town as all of them run parallel to the valley conditions that are formed parallel to the movement of surface water. This is the typical negotiation of the surface water stream that we have observed in many other smaller settlements in the valley.

This is one of the important systems that influence the form of the city as it guides the space that gets organized around these movement axes and also form the backbone of the important and primordial physical and physiological link of man with agriculture. See figure 7 *This community public realm (short connections) forms the backbone to hold the key communal elements and function of the city at a more immediate basis. This is the "social space"<sup>ii</sup> that communities create, nurture and mould for their own self. This is a very intimate*

*and communally responsive feature that emerges from the attitude of the community towards their landscape and agriculture. It has qualities of immediacy and close connection with the daily life and perhaps ritual of the people of Patan. It conveys message of reverence to the source of life, its acknowledgement and a pact to maintain a balance with the forces of nature. This is the just the other public realm and in direct contract to the one that is created in the center of the city through the open ground and some key institutions of power and trade. This realm is more domestic, closely associated with the ritual traditions of the community and often the symbolism is coded only revealing to the community itself.*

### **The meeting of human and natural realms**

It is also observed that places where the natural water flow through the city intersects with the man made community institutions alike markets, monasteries and temples ultimately has immense public importance. The expression around water streams takes a very interesting form in the Kathmandu valley region. The *Peepul* tree and a small shrine are often found to be around the lowest point of the ground slopes at the place from where the water is received from upstream and then goes down to the fields. See Figure 8. This gesture of marking space through worship of the *Peepul* tree and installing a shrine has immense cultural significance as the space is invoked through use of religious symbols and rituals. The public nature of the space is further emphasized by small plinth below the tree that supports community activities and many idols of worship around the tree trunk. The water, plinth, tree and the religious artifacts together attach a certain meaning over a period of time. This is perhaps the beginnings of place making that acknowledges certain landscape condition and will have to be accounted for while studying public places and temple complexes in old cities.

The acknowledgement of water gets reflected through different expressions within the town of Manang. See figure 9 and 10. Water is revered, guarded and acknowledged but not necessarily celebrated in space like in the dry-arid regions of the Indian sub-continent. In Manang for example the main public community place of importance gets built around a stream outfall around which is a water hole for horses and for washing purpose. The two guardians Juniper tree on both side of the water outlets add a level of importance and accord protection. The main public space follows the direction that is established by the water outfalls and the trees, *mani* prayer wheels, *stupa* and monastery combine together to hold the place as one of community importance. It is interesting how natural elements are modified and accorded a level of both importance and protection through use of religious artifacts. This again together forms a 'place' that becomes special and one of community importance over a period of time. This is place where the old gather, or the place where the feasts are cooked at the community kitchen, the place to settle disputes, the place to get married, to catch the latest gossip, to gamble, drink, make merry or just a place to loathe around and catch the afternoon sun.

The community washing places around the water stream in Kagbeni (Mustang) forms the most important public place on the edge of the old city. See figure 11. It is interesting how the water stream that skirts the old city has a very interesting public dimensions, all due to the Juniper trees all along its bank giving both a ecological as well as social response to the place. At the place where the pedestrian path intersects the water stream, a small area is made for washing clothes, along with a local brewery that makes *raski* (apple whisky) surrounded by some houses and the old monastery. Here again it seems to be an interesting mix of trees, water, community structure and the monastery that adds a public dimension to the place.

In Patan, which was a capital town with a strong tradition of fine arts and architecture, such public places become larger than life in terms of both size and elaboration by their gestures of water structures and building architecture. This can be observed in the Kumbheshwar

temple complex that has a five tiered building with three water fountain ponds and large open space around it. See figure 12. But the origin of the complex seems to have been in the invocation of the place itself. The position of the large *peepul* tree behind the water pond along with the topographical condition of the area suggests very humble origins of the place much like many such shrines around the town. The temple complex is on a special landscape zone; at the point where contours turn and surface water channels are formed<sup>iii</sup>. The large *peepul* tree with a small shrine forms backdrop to the five storied temple structure. It is not surprising that water fountains (*hitis*) and water ponds form important parts of the whole experience of the temple complex [4]. This is an interesting example of a public place that celebrates water as it flows from higher slopes of the city towards the river by according a level of importance to the water structure by their architecture (and embellishments). What's more, these water fountains are actually pauses in an elaborate system of urban water conduits that are channelized along natural slopes for community use. But then they no longer remain utility structures and are revealed by their elaboration, presence of religious shrines in the fountains and positioning around sacred trees and temples. Again, the issue of 'place making' around natural elements of water and trees is a very fundamental in this part of the world and that is what perhaps draws people over time.

### **Conclusions: The structuring principles of Himalayancity**

The Himalayan cities are structured around ideas of nature and its relationship with human endeavors. The key principles of this structure are listed as follows

#### **The larger existential connection and human aspirations**

The expressions of architecture and public places seem to exhibit a legible and clear language in the heart of the city. This seems to emerge from the very specific, limited and yet complete nature of the landscape of the valley itself. The limitation in the domain of politics and economy contribute to the sense of the place and the city is seen as its representative. The idea of the public architecture and public spaces of the cities in Himalayas embodies the sense of this cultural landscape by being more physically legible and sure in its expression, relying less on universal symbolism or universal typological devices for communication and more on the singular dominating idea of a public places. This public place is formed on the route that connects with the other world entering the city and meets the large open ground with clear and strong expressions of public architecture. This gesture of public place through open grounds and buildings is also the one that embodies idea of a city; of human construct signifying the position and connection of the city with the world at large.

#### **The balance with nature**

The other public realm is formed by spaces formed along the flow of water, with the network of street, small shrines, water points and temples etc. This structures majority of the sloping ground of the city, as it meets the river below. The position of the city at higher grounds results in the parallel valleys of surface drains running to the river becoming the place where these community level activities and public places occur. These community spaces are almost primordial in its origin as it signify the traditional connection of humans with elements of nature; water, soil and vegetation. It portrays a fine balance between man and nature and is often symbolized through complex symbolism and rituals

#### **The meeting of human and natural constructs**

The places or spots where the man-made constructs of streets and building meets the natural landscape condition that are prominent, like turning of the contours and thick patch of vegetation becomes the place where many public places are formed. Often temple



complexes around small open clearings, with tanks and such are to be found in such areas. These become larger community level public places and signify the meeting of the human and the natural construct in the city

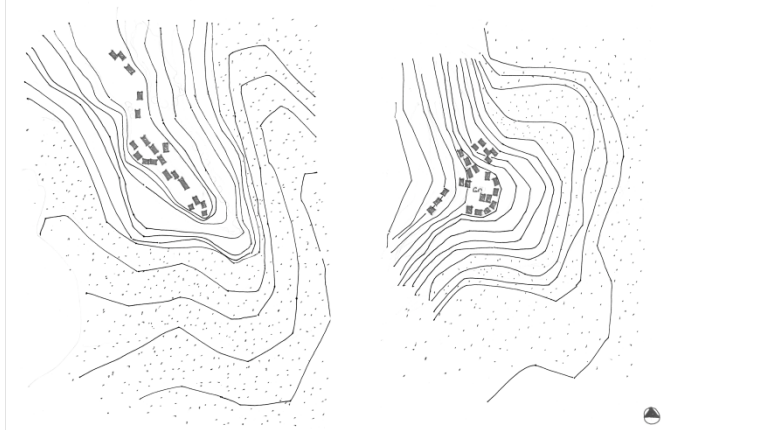


Figure 1: Settlements on Ridge

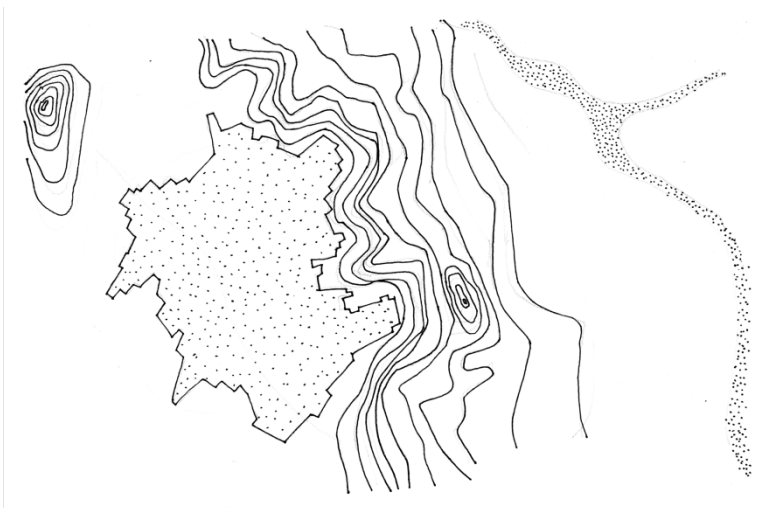


Figure 2: Patan on the Ridge



Figure 3: The Palace and open space in Mandi



Figure 4: The Durbar Square and Palace in Patan

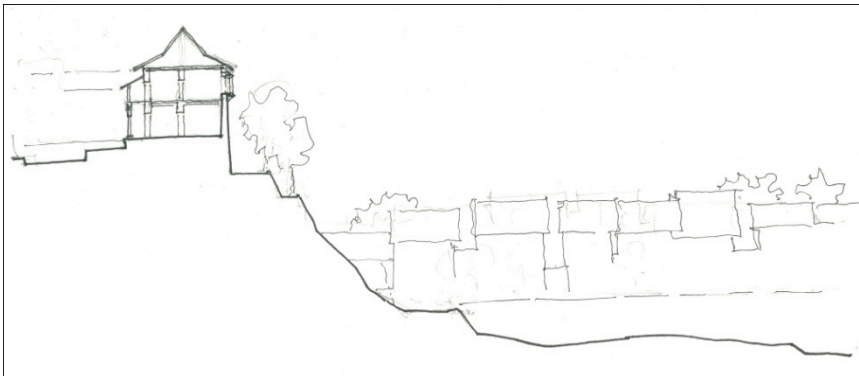


Figure 5: Section through the Palace and original open space, Mandi

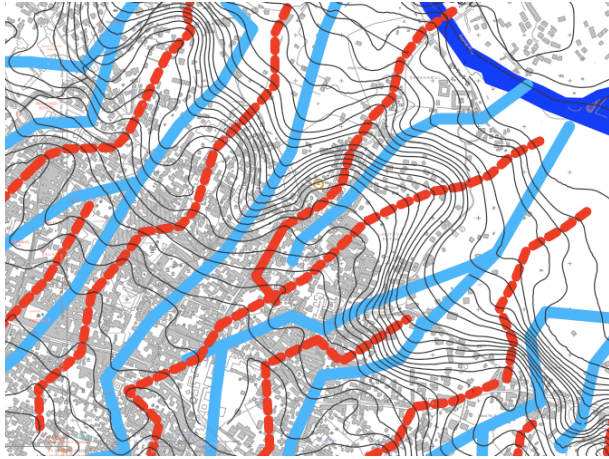


Figure 6: The valleys (blue) and ridges (red) in Patan

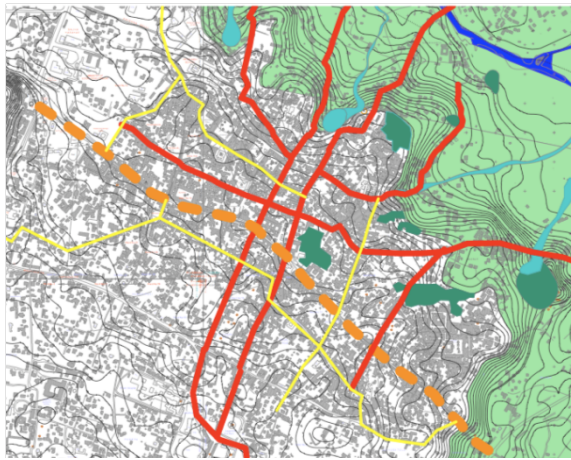


Figure 7: Two different structuring systems, Patan

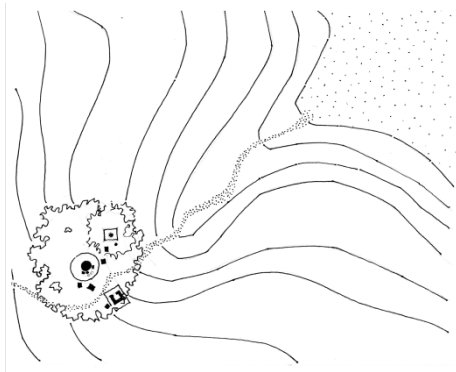


Figure 8: The peepul tree, water and temple



Figure 9: The community place of Manang

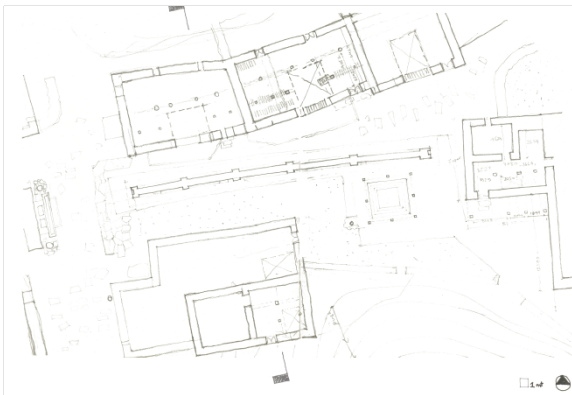


Figure 10: Plan of the community place, Manang

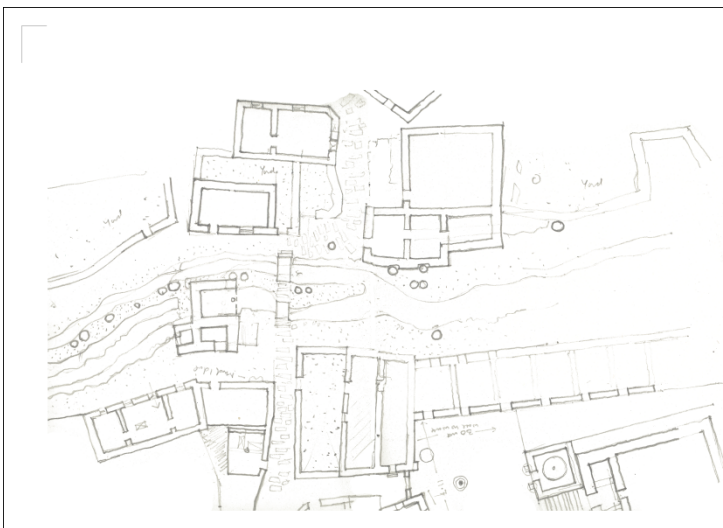


Figure 11: Community space around water stream in Kagbeni, Mustang



Figure 12: Kunbheshwar temple at Patan

### Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> Most old cities like Patan would have outgrown their original core and would have engulfed either neighboring hamlets and such linear extensions. The historical description by Mary Shepherd Slusser about growth and origin of Patan corroborate such outgrowth

<sup>ii</sup> Using Lefebvre (Production of Space) concept of social space

<sup>iii</sup> A contour and slope analysis has been carried out to understand the nature of surface water flow and its relationship with the temple complex

### Reference:

[1] Wikipedia, Shangri-La. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shangri-La>,

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[4] UN-HABITAT, Water Movement in Patan, UNHS, 2008. pp. 03