

Seeing the Rural in Urban Bhutan

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Re-assessing Himalayan Urbanisation

In many cultural imaginaries, the idea of the Himalayas is of pristine peaks, home of eternal snows and mythical creatures. The idea of a Himalayan city might bring to mind a place like James Hilton's Shangri-La, a concealed valley of eternal youth and happiness hidden somewhere in the snowbound vastness.¹ The reality, of course, is that the Himalayas have for millennia been bisected with trails to trading entrepôts and religious centres around which settlements grew. This includes cities of the lower hills, such as Kathmandu, ancient home to a crossroads of cultures, or Gangtok, more recently settled around an 18th century pilgrimage site. Thimphu in the middle hills is at a higher altitude, and closer to the imaginary of snow peaks and pristine environments. Or is it?

Thimphu is far younger than most other towns and cities in the lower and middle Himalayas, and as a youthful latecomer, is in a position to learn from the urbanisation experience of others. It can chart its course with the benefit of hindsight, as Bhutan has done with its national environmental conservation policies.

Thimphu's vision of urban villages has been planned on paper, but not much of that is evident in the Thimphu of 2020. Today's Thimphu looks very little like the Thimphu of the Structural Plan, which, since its inception, has been repeatedly assessed and analysed.² With thinking on urbanisation and cities continuing to evolve, this paper poses the question: "What is still missing from the vision of Thimphu as a Himalayan capital city?"

The answer proposed here is a place for, and connection with, nature; to get rid of the urban-rural divide in our thinking, and instead to see in terms of interconnectedness and embeddedness within a greater landscape. Cities are now considered planet earth's newest wildlife habitat. Yet most urban

¹ Hilton, J. (2003/1933). *Lost Horizon* (70th Anniversary ed). Summersdale.

² Ministry of Works and Human Settlement. (2008). *Thimphu City Development Strategy*. Royal Government of Bhutan; Bajaj, M. (2014). *Thimphu's growing pains: Challenges of implementing the city plan*. The Centre for Bhutan Studies & GNH Research; Ministry of Works and Human Settlement. (2018). *Strategic Environmental Assessment for the Thimphu Structure Plan*. Royal Government of Bhutan.

citizens do not have a relationship with the environment that is nourishing. The classical Latin word for “city” is *urbs*. This is the root word for the English adjective “urban”, which means relating to, or characteristic of, a town or city. Urbanisation generally refers to a demographic process of increase in population to a denser area of settlement, relative to the surrounding areas, and is associated with an increased density of the built environment. While processes of urbanisation vary, and there are no mountain-specific criteria for Himalayan urbanisation, and national definitions continue to change, some similarities in contexts and processes of urbanisation in Himalayan towns and cities can be discussed. Urbanisation has broadly similar physical constraints in Himalayan valleys -- steep unstable slopes, rivers at the bottom, and usually a previous land-use pattern, whereby any flat land was used for cultivation. Land is at such a premium that changes in land use are inevitably trade-offs which are often politically difficult to navigate.

In the late 20th century, massive demographic and social changes have shifted NGO, academic and public attention to Himalayan urban centres. There is population growth, migration and increased tourism, together with growing concern over climate change challenges to mountain peoples. Much of the attention thus far has been on the interrelated issues of migration, water scarcity, inadequate infrastructure and resource distribution. This is often in the context of disaster, whether sudden (earthquakes) or slow (climate change), whereby existing problems of population increase put a strain on service delivery and infrastructure.³

Rural-urban Connections

Conventional thinking about the urban defines it in opposition to the rural. This polarity is often accompanied by social baggage and prejudice, where rural represents traditional, backwards, less-educated, and urban represents modern, forward-thinking, educated. While the social, political, cultural and economic divides between town and country exist, this polarised way of understanding the urban (or the rural) is mistaken. Empirically, it is a caricature and generalisation that breaks down under scrutiny. Conceptually, it overlooks the dialectical relationship of rural-urban; without one, there is not the other.

³ Kovács, E. K., Ojha, H., Neupane, K. R., Niven, T., Agarwal, C., Chauhan, D., Dahal, N., Devkota, K., Guleria, V., Joshi, T., Michael, N. K., Pandey, A., Singh, N., Singh, V., Thadani, R., & Vira, B. (2019). A political ecology of water and small-town urbanisation across the lower Himalayas. *Geoforum*, 107, 88–98.

What this binary has meant in theory and in practice is that there is a lingering blindness in seeing and understanding how urban and rural are interrelated, and making mental room for the evolution of this relationship. Environmental conservation and sustainable socio-economic development are two pillars of GNH but it is noticeable that these twinned concepts are less evidently connected in Bhutan's urban centres. For example, conventional thinking is that environmental conservation is for national parks, areas in the countryside, away from urban centres, while sustainable development happens within the confines of rural communities, and rapid (uncontrolled) economic development happens in urban centres. If this trend was to continue, the irony is that Bhutan's towns and cities would undermine, rather than attest to, national environmental claims and commitments.

Re-thinking Urban in Bhutan

Bhutan's urbanisation processes differ from other Himalayan cities and towns in that the overall national population is much lower, and immigration is mainly from within the country, although there is a significant regional migrant labour population. There are lower numbers and visibility of informal or squatter settlements, although they do exist. Unlike places where settlements are socio-economically segregated, housing is relatively mixed due to government subsidised housing and the Bhutanese practice of living with family or extended family members.⁴

A less-noted particularity of urbanisation in Bhutan is how it may be shaped by the national socio-historical contexts of migration, where people and centres of governance shifted. Until 1952 the winter capital was in Punakha, and the summer capital in Thimphu. Even today, the population's winter shift from the highlands to the central valleys, and from the temperate zones to southern towns, such as Gelephu, Samdrup Jongkhar and Phuntsholing, is noticeable in the closed offices and empty dwellings, as government meetings and religious teachings are seasonally shifted farther south.

This summer's COVID-19 lockdown brought an abrupt halt to movement within the country. The government and volunteer citizens have done a truly

⁴ Walcott, S. (2009). Geographical Field Notes Urbanization in Bhutan. *Geographical Review*, 99(1), 81–93. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1931-0846.2009.tb00419.x>

magnificent job of delivering necessary goods and establishing zonation and timings so that people could get outside. Yet the shutdown has highlighted the extent to which urbanisation is crowding out the natural environment in built-up places. Residential buildings built at minimum cost for maximum profit use up every possible square-inch of an area, with no balconies, never mind access to public or communal greenspace. A cursory look at many of the settlement colonies sprouting up seems to indicate that the majority of the city's denizens appear to be living in "survival spaces", rather than "living places".

Bhutan's visible urban-rural divergence and polarity of waste (urban) and wilderness (rural), offer a thought-provoking juxtaposition and paradox. Why are environmental policies strongly upheld in the countryside but seemingly less so in urban areas? How is it that villages appear to be cleaner of non-biodegradable rubbish than urban centres? How are people's behaviours different in different locales, and what are the structural factors that enable or promote these differences? It is in the urban centres that the disparities of GNH are glaringly evident -- private-public conflicts of interest in land-use, littering and waste management and so on. Why is it that the trend in towns, as opposed to in the countryside, have been remedial rather than precautionary?

Using this rather arbitrary juxtaposition as framing, looking through social science lenses of urban political ecologies breaks down the binary. The Himalayan Connections project that I am currently involved with studies geographically remote communities in the Himalayas --villages that take over a week to walk to, where the road has yet to reach. While it might be tempting to think of such communities in terms of remote or out of touch with the urban -- following chains of causation -- it soon becomes clear that the relationship is far more than a rural-urban dialectic of opposition, or of isolation. These communities are, in different ways, connected to urban centres.

They are politically connected through different levels of governance. They are connected economically through waged labour, whether it be easterners from Mongar or Trashigang going up to work in highland "Austra-Laya",⁵ Layaps coming down the Punakha to sell yak dairy and

⁵ The "Austra-Laya" of Bhutan – KuenselOnline. (Oct. 20, 2015). Retrieved 17 September 2020, from <https://kuenselonline.com/the-austra-laya-of-bhutan/>

high-altitude herbs, or Lunaps buying land with houses, compound bows and other such financial exchanges. Follow the currency trail of a yartsa goenbub (*Ophiocordyceps sinensis*) and one sees that it eventually flows into and out of global capital cycles with purchasing, manufacturing, and distribution channels extending far overseas.

These communities are connected socially and ecologically through grazing and winter land-use agreements, part of a customary agro-pastoral system. These practices have been impacted by changes in migratory livestock laws, and most recently thrown into disarray due to changing climate patterns. Very late and heavy snowfall on the passes meant that highlanders were caught between a rock and a hard place. Communities that hosted their wintering mules wanted them gone, but with the late snow and passes still covered, the highlanders had nowhere to take them, and suffered greatly on the trek back.⁶

Irregularities and new extremes in climatological phenomena stem from fossil fuel and other resources extraction and utilisation, with the resultant increase of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. Much of this activity occurs in urban and industrial places, far from the remote villages of Lingshi, Laya or Lunana, but nonetheless intimately connected with them in multiple ways.

An urban ecosystems perspective or urban political ecology framing recognises the interdependence of social relations, and the environment which combines both human and non-human elements, in articulation with urban ecologies. It is, for example, impossible to understand virus transmission or species habitat changes, extinction, diversity or propagation without understanding them within a continuum of human socio-political relationships. We see these connections more clearly when there are eruptions, such as the case with COVID-19, or disruptions, when supply lines or communications networks are cut.

We can see the city or town in the remote highland village -- the technologies for communications, choppers for transport, in trends and tastes, especially of the younger generations, that issue from urban places, whether Thimphu or Tokyo. Why is it harder to see the distant highland village in the town? Perhaps it should not be.

⁶ "Lunaps finally home after two and a half months of arduous journey", BBS. June 25, 2020.

On the philosophical or psychological level, a documentary such as *School Among Glaciers*⁷ -- or the film it closely inspired, *Lunana: A Yak in the Classroom*⁸ -- communicates that we all have values we believe in or grow into, and sometimes these are vividly manifested in real places that resonate into metaphor, passing over the actual hardships of life in such places. Such sites of positive action and harmony are vital to the human psyche.

Re-acting for Ecological Urbanisation

Following COVID-19 lockdowns around the world, it has become clearer than ever that having access to a clean natural environment is of material importance to human well-being, to childhood development, to mental health, and that urbanisation brings with it a risk of human alienation from the unbuilt-up world around. The idea of nodal villages within a larger city, as per the Local Area Plans and Thimphu Structural Plan, is even more relevant in a post-COVID-19 landscape.

It is far easier to make space for nature proactively rather than retroactively. It is obvious that concrete colonies with no natural light, no fresh air, no green growing, no soil decomposition nor non-human creature inhabiting it, is an unnatural state of affairs. This was a big mistake of the idea of modernity, especially when translated into urban planning and architecture -- its separation from the so-called pre-modern, from the messy world around, full of lively and uncontrollable elements. So what constitutes an eco-friendly urbanisation?

Green buildings incorporate plants and trees and the tiny microbial worlds that support them. “Living buildings”⁹ are a growing vision that goes beyond LEED¹⁰ design and ratings, to create buildings that are human habitats in themselves and also part of the wider landscape ecology. Living buildings regenerate and produce net positives – waste, water, energy. In a sense, they function like forests. They are still ahead of the times and outstrip building codes, but they are worth thinking about, and the gauntlet has been thrown down.

⁷Dorji Wangchuk. (2004). *School Among Glaciers*—Bhutan. BBS. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YdO_k7rELFQ&t=2457s

⁸ Pawo Choyning Dorji. (2019) *Lunana: A Yak in the Classroom*. Dangphu Dingphu.

⁹ <https://living-future.org>

¹⁰ Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design <http://leed.usgbc.org/leed.html>

Criteria in the challenge for a building to be considered a living building include the capacity to grow and store food based on floor area ratio, biophilic environment to nurture the human-nature connection, and infrastructure that is equally accessible to all, with fresh air, sunlight and natural waterways.

Bhutan has wonderful examples in its traditional architecture that already embody sustainability. For example, rammed earth is one of the oldest methods of construction, uses locally available material, has high load-bearing capacity, high thermal mass, and low embodied energy. And this is not yet touching on the intangible value of community building that has traditionally accompanied house construction in Bhutan. In Thimphu valley, the buildings of the Bhutan Nuns' Foundation Training and Resource Centre at Tsalumaphay express the harmony in miniature of what an urban village might grow from.

In Buddhist thought, dying well is integral to living well. "Full-lifecycle buildings" could be a Bhutanese contribution to green architecture and urbanism. Structures that return to their beginnings with real harmony, as rammed earth houses do, slowly weathering and melting back into the land, with the useful parts borne off for re-use in another dwelling. Traditional materials and forms can also be further modified and developed for urban life in the 21st century. On the innovative side, materials like hempcrete, made from hemp and lime that provides good insulation and works well in earthquake prone areas, could be explored as a carbon negative alternative to carbon-intense concrete.

Time and movement, whether in daily or seasonal cycles or other, remain features of the urban, despite attempts at their erasure through technology and the 24/7 lifestyle aspired to in (post)modern living. As seasonal movement of habitation continues to be a *modus vivendi* for many Bhutanese, these processes could be incorporated into urban planning, so that this becomes a recognised strength, rather than an absence seen through sedentary lenses.

On a daily basis, COVID-19 has again brought to the forefront how spatio-temporal planning ("zoning") for movement is vital to urban processes (including urban farming and kitchen garden access), and the well-being of citizens. On a seasonal basis, shifting governance (meetings with

local, district, and national representatives), and shifting service-delivery (schooling, availing of extension services), continue to be invaluable to people in the highlands, who depend on being able to move to lower altitudes to continue inhabiting the higher altitudes.

Seeing the World in a Grain of Sand

Bhutan is still in a position to change the course of its urbanisation and to do so without the historically imagined compartmentalisation between the city and the country. This way of thinking is not new: “To see the world in a grain of sand, and a heaven in a wildflower”, William Blake wrote over a century and a half ago. While the idea is probably as old as human culture, Blake beautifully expresses how a part embodies the whole within which it exists. Closer to home, it is what is behind the Bhutan Ecological Society’s “impactscales” approach¹¹, that sees the urban as existing within a larger ecological landscape.

Around the country, a marvellous start has been made with fallow land reclamation and urban agriculture schemes. This is not only a move towards self-sufficiency, but a reclamation of heritage. Paro, in maintaining its rice fields in between urbanising spaces, holds on to what Thimphu has almost entirely lost, with the help of government intervention. But within the larger Himalayan urbanscape, Paro is connected to Thimphu, as well as to the mountains and rivers around. How to better account for this? In practical terms, town plans and assessments could sit within landscape as well as local scales that account for metabolic (waste, energy) and multispecies migratory flows.

The excellent Bhutan Green Buildings Guidelines¹² should have regulatory elements, as well as positive incentives for directly and proactively addressing green building goals. Urbanites can be engaged to value and learn about urban nature and wildlife, birds, bees, butterflies, amphibians, and so on. Rural and natural elements can be cultivated within urban environs, from biodiversity-friendly garden allotments to marshy areas that are left as natural habitat.

¹¹ <https://bes.org.bt>

¹² The Engineering Adaptation & Risk Reduction Division Department of Engineering Services. (2013). Bhutan Green Building Design Guidelines. Ministry of Works and Human Settlement, Royal Government of Bhutan.

This paper has asked “What is missing from the vision of urbanisation in Bhutan?” and proposed that one answer is to stop thinking of “urban” in opposition to “rural”, and instead to see the rural in the urban, and to make room for nature. Understanding this interconnectedness as process should inform how we think about urban spaces, the humans, plants, animals, microbes and all their activities, in relationship to the wider world around, from the highlands where the rivers start, all the way to the sea where the waters flow. A person in Thimphu should be able to look around and see a GNH city that cares for the wellbeing of all its inhabitants, human and non-human, a city that thrives in harmony within the wider environment. This would be an outstanding model of Himalayan urbanisation.