

Designing for a Mindfulness Future

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When we were first invited to design a Mindfulness City for Bhutan's future generations, the brief was just one word: "Mindfulness". No masterplan, no list of objectives, no regulations or guidelines; simply a word, handed to us like a seed.

At first, the simplicity was exciting, liberating even, but soon we realised it was also daunting. In the West, mindfulness is a word we hear all the time — printed on yoga studio posters, whispered in meditation apps, mentioned in workplace seminars; yet for all its use, we do not always understand how deep it can go.

In Bhutan, mindfulness is not a wellness trend; it is a quiet, steady way of moving through life, rooted in centuries of Buddhist teaching and woven naturally into everyday routines.

We knew from the start that designing such a city without actually experiencing Bhutan would be impossible, so we boarded a plane to Paro, ready to see the site and let the culture speak to us directly.

Flying into Bhutan is unlike arriving anywhere else — the plane weaves between Himalayan peaks so close you can almost touch them, with ridges and valleys opening and closing around you. From the window I spotted monasteries clinging to cliffs, almost as if they had grown from the rock itself.

The moment we stepped onto the tarmac, it felt like we had entered a different rhythm. The air was sharp and clean, and the mountains seemed to just hug the valley. Prayer flags streamed in the breeze, their colours faded by years of sun, rain and snow — proof of how long traditions last and how quietly they endure.

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Even the wind felt mindful, moving at its own pace, and the winding roads forced us to slow down, to look straight ahead, to match our movements to the land.

In the days that followed, we travelled through valleys and small towns, visited dzongs and temples, and began to feel the slow heartbeat of the place. People walked in the streets without rush, children played outside, families shared moments together, and kindness seemed to be part of the air you breathed.

We tried to understand Buddhism not only as a belief system but as a way of living — one where compassion and respect come before yourself. Our guide, speaking with the matter-of-fact tone of someone explaining the weather, told us, “If you do good, good will come.”

It was then we started to understand that mindfulness here is not something you practice in certain moments — it is something you are all the time. It is an acceptance of what is around you and of what happens to you, not as a random consequence of events, but as the outcome of your actions and decisions.

Still, translating this way of being into urban planning was not easy. On our third day, we sat with two monks in a small room overlooking the river valley and spoke for hours about what mindfulness really means.

When we asked for a definition, they hesitated —not because they did not know, but because it is not something you can reduce to one sentence. Finally, one monk said, “If you drink a glass of water and you are not mindful, you might not notice there’s a fly in it. You drink the fly. But if you are mindful, you are fully concentrated on what you are doing, and you are aware of yourself and of the environment around you. Mindfulness means being aware.” The image was simple, almost ordinary, but it stayed with me. Awareness can be both the smallest and the biggest thing.

I thought about it for a while, and then I asked if maybe that is why so many things in Bhutan look similar — the clothes people wear, the way buildings are designed, the streets, the trees, even the signage; often blue with white text saying “restaurant” or “cheese shop”. The monk laughed and said he had never noticed it, but that my interpretation might be right.

From that moment, the idea of a Mindfulness City started to take shape: A place where streets do not fight for your attention but guide it gently, where buildings do not shout for recognition but live in harmony with each other and with the landscape, where spaces can invite both solitude and connection.

Architecture would evolve from Bhutan's historic style — timber frames, whitewashed walls, deep-set windows, gently sloping roofs — not to keep the past frozen, but to make the transition from what was, to what will feel natural.

Rather than racing to the sky, buildings would frame a human-scaled environment where people feel comfortable, where light and wind can flow freely and uninterrupted, carrying the rhythm of the seasons through streets and courtyards.

Streets would meander and remain narrower than in large metropolises, with few private cars; quiet, trackless trams would carry people where they needed to go without the constant noise or vibrations. Public spaces would be conceived as places to pause — courtyards with a single tree at their centre, plazas for neighbours to gather, and small parks for children's play and elders' conversations.

In the city, people will be invited to walk — not rush from one place to another, but enjoy the relatively flat lands and take the time to discover the journey. Like a pilgrimage.

I remember when I first hiked up to Tiger's Nest. With my group of colleagues, we ventured into the rain and fog, on a misty September morning. We could not see Tiger's Nest until we reached the top, more than a kilometre above the starting point. We kept climbing, trusting the path, knowing our destination was there, even if hidden from view.

And during the journey, we were not stopping to take photos of grand views — the fog concealed them. Instead, we saw the rocks and mud under our feet, the lush ferns growing on tree trunks, the water droplets on leaves. I still remember the smell of the forest. In that climb, I was mindful.

And so we were inspired. Like the pilgrimage to Tiger's Nest, the city will be full of places to discover and reach through physical, mental and experiential journeys.

The temple-dam was one of those ideas — an honest showcase of the city's engine, its “back of house” powered by nature. We imagined transforming the dam into a man-made cliff of thousands of steps, leading visitors to both a spiritual and recreational hub at the heart of what would otherwise be a blank concrete wall. It serves a functional purpose, but it also invites people to discover it, to learn from it, and to reflect along the way.

The rivers and water are the drivers of the Mindfulness City — its core engine, both naturally and operationally. When we first arrived in Gelephu, we were guided to a beautiful outlook where the entire site unfolded beneath us.

In that moment, we felt we had found our answer. The rivers spread across the land like veins, carrying life through every part of it, and we realised: This is what it is all about — rivers and streams. We could almost hear the land whispering its solution to us, and we listened.

Back at the sketchbook, we captured that moment of awareness and placed it at the foundation of the plan. Nature would not be something added at the end, but the first thing to plan around.

We would begin by mapping the areas not to touch — the rivers that must keep flowing, the forests that must remain wild, the paths animals use to cross the land — before marking any space for buildings. The flow of water would also stand as a constant reminder of the flow of time, of passing, of learning, and of growth.

And here, like dzongs that find their place along major rivers, or prayer wheels powered by flowing water, a series of bridges become the unifying moment where nature and humanity meet.

These bridges are inhabitable — not just a way to move from A to B, but places of connection, where socially, physically and mentally we connect with ourselves, with others and with nature. They double as community centres, markets, universities, hospitals and spiritual spaces, making them

not only the connective tissue of the city but also its icons and landmarks. Each bridge becomes a living part of urban life, where activity, learning and reflection flow together as seamlessly as the rivers below.

The bridges connect neighbourhoods where homes and workplaces are positioned to frame the mountains instead of blocking them. Gardens and green corridors weave through each district, so that every walk might include the sound of wind in the leaves or the scent of flowers in bloom.

Even signage becomes part of mindfulness — kept minimal, consistent and harmoniously integrated into the environment, so the mind is not constantly pulled away from the present moment.

These ideas grew out of Bhutan's philosophy of Gross National Happiness, which measures progress not just in economic growth but in cultural strength, environmental health, and the quality of community life.

It can be seen in three areas: The self, the environment, and the community. In the Mindfulness City, design would nurture all three — spaces for learning and reflection to support the self, environmental planning that protects biodiversity and works with the seasons, and places where people can meet, share, and feel they belong.

But Buddhist teaching also reminds us that mindfulness means seeing reality as it is — not only its beauty but its limits. Bhutan's protection of tradition has kept its authenticity alive, but it has also created challenges.

Many young Bhutanese feel their future cannot be built at home, so they leave for opportunities elsewhere. The same is happening with architecture: Traditional craft is being replaced by fast, cheap construction, often concrete, with a style that mimics the Bhutanese identity without being truly part of it.

Awareness here means noticing this shift and finding a more honest way to transition from handmade to manufactured, keeping the spirit of the tradition alive even as materials and methods evolve. Craftsmanship has made Bhutan mindful of its resources, combining building and ornament with symbolism, belief, and the patience to carve, paint, and weld stories and materials together.

This is the mindfulness we want to design for — a city where there is meaning in each element, and meaning in how you experience it.

A Mindfulness City could be part of that evolution — a place that holds on to wisdom while making space for innovation, a place that is not only beautiful to visit but a real home; a city for Bhutanese and for those from outside who want to be part of its future.

If mindfulness can be so deeply embedded in a city that it shapes how people move, interact and live, then maybe it can ripple outward, influencing the world beyond. And in that work, there is no better teaching than the one Bhutan has to give.