

Beyond Brick and Mortar

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Visitors are enraptured by the purple flush of wisteria, the rich array of indigenous plants and herbs, miniature *dzongs* surrounded by bursts of flowers and local vegetation. Children squeal with delight at the sight of two soft pink pigs – made of roses. Families pose for photographs that go viral on social media. It is summer, 2016, at the Royal Garden Flower Exhibition held on the 18-acre grounds of the Ugyen Pelri Palace in Paro.

The Royal Bhutan Flower Exhibition is a tangible vision of a colourful, environmentally and aesthetically pleasing Bhutan. Held in various towns around the country, it captures the vision of a more beautiful Bhutan and models a thriving social space for families. We are reminded that aesthetics, beautification, and social public spaces are critical needs in urban Bhutan.

Immediately outside the “gated exhibition garden”,¹ lies the stark reality of “characterless” Paro town, as one resident describes it. Shops display some potted plants to beautify the footpath while stray dogs jostle with children in the park. The town needs a youth centre, but has no funds for it.

Not far away, Bajo and Punakha towns are cemented neighbourhoods with little aesthetics, while Thimphu, Phuntsholing and other towns are battling traffic, mounting garbage and waste, and desperately trying to improve services to cope with increasing demand.

Bhutan’s urbanisation is a tale of inspiring plans that have fallen short. Many gaps need urgent attention in the dynamic spaces we call urban Bhutan, especially in the larger towns of Thimphu (114,551 residents),² Phuntsholing (27,658 residents)³ and Paro (about 6,000 residents).⁴

¹ The annual garden and flower shows are often confined to a specific space that is locked after hours.

² Thimphu district has a total population of 138,736, of which 114,551 are in the town. (NSB statistical Yearbook, 2019)

³ Phuntsholing has a total population of 68,966 residents, of which 27,658 live in the town. (NSB statistical Yearbook, 2019)

⁴ Paro district’s population is 46,316, and about 6,000 are living in the main town and Bondey town (NSB statistical Yearbook, 2019 and *Dzongkhag* Administration)

This article looks at the need to create more liveable, resilient towns, where communities work with municipal authorities to develop safe, healthy environments.

Background

Bhutan recorded the highest rates of rural-urban migration between 2000 and 2005 (7.3 percent annually).⁵ More than 19.5% of the population live in Thimphu and Phuntsholing today. A shortage of affordable housing has resulted in more than 5,000 Bhutanese living across the border in the Indian town of Jaigaon, who had to be repatriated in 2020 to protect them from the COVID-19 threat.

The urban population comprises largely youths, pulled to the towns to look for jobs, for education opportunities, or simply to be with family. Some older folk have also left green farms to live in cement apartments on top of one another.

A World Bank and Royal Government of Bhutan (RGoB) report warns: “Bhutan is reaching a point where gaps in urban planning, service delivery, and affordable housing within cities can start to negatively affect economic growth and competitiveness, as well as quality of life over the long-term”.⁶

What, then, is Bhutan’s vision for townships in a rapidly urbanising country?

The Bhutanese Town

Spatial environments shape the way we live, and apartment living changes the way people interact, play and socialise.

One of the aims of the *thromde* (municipality) Rules 2011 is to “improve the quality of life of people in the local community”. This is a distant goal today, as growing drug abuse, alcoholism, and unemployment are becoming common woes. They reflect deeper causes, including the lack of community and neighbourliness, as a subsistence farming population takes to urban living.

⁵ NSB policy report, Rural-urban migration and urbanisation, policy brief, 2017 noted that Bhutan’s 2005 census showed an urban migration rate of 7.3 percent in the years between 2000-2005, slowing down to 2.9 percent by 2017.

⁶ World Bank and Royal Government of Bhutan, Bhutan Urban Policy Notes, 2019

Bhutan's towns are stereotypes of cement apartments and limited recreational areas. Grocery shops and bars occupy the ground floors of most buildings. "Entertainment" businesses that are poor imitations of Bangkok nightlife are emerging. Residents bemoan the lack of "things to do" in towns, and there are inadequate sports facilities, public libraries, holistic community learning centres, or parks.

The facts say it all: Thimphu, the capital, has more than 700 bars, about 38 karaoke bars, 13 drayangs, and other nightspots. The many late-night entertainment revolving around alcohol consumption creates conditions for an unhealthy way of life, and smaller towns are aping trends in Thimphu.

Global research has shown that poor urban planning tends to destroy social networks within a community (Putnam 1993) with ensuing social problems. The rigid divide between "rural" and "urban" areas destroys social connections and linkages between small towns and their surrounding rural communities.

Thimphu's experiment with a low-income public housing colony in the 1990s was a test case. About 3,500 people from across Bhutan and living in Thimphu were relocated to Changjiji, an experimental suburb of 70 buildings with inadequate footpaths, no social space, and a reputation for petty crime and youth "gangs". Neighbours did not know each other. There were later attempts at creating social facilities -- including a market, a temple, youth centres and a library⁷ -- but Changjiji remains a glaring example of the need for urban planning with safe, healthy communities, beyond brick and mortar.

Other urban trends like shopping malls, car showrooms and hotels, are not improving the quality of life in a country with about 735,553 population.⁸

American urban planner Jonathan Rose emphasises the importance of weaving a "fabric of community" and the need to involve people in urban planning. He highlights "communities of opportunities" that give us some markers as Bhutan works towards an Economic plan for 2030:

⁷ Civil society organisations and other organisations eventually stepped up to provide a neighbourhood centre in Changjiji with services and facilities.

⁸ NSB, Population and Housing Census 2017 figures.

“A community of opportunity should be safe from physical and social threats... be free of toxic compounds in the water, land and air. Its residents should have access to affordable health care and to social and mental health services... It should have excellent public education systems... include diverse people, housing types and opportunities. Its governance should be transparent and free from corruption, and its citizens should be able to play a significant role in both its long-range planning and its short-term discussions.”

People's Participation

Resilient towns meet the needs of its residents, including food, shelter, jobs and income, transport, water and energy, entertainment, and social support. Essential ingredients include safe and a variety of stable homes, healthy environments, connected neighbourhoods where people know their neighbours, and community networks that work towards social good.

Creating liveable and resilient cities requires the engagement of communities. The government is launching efforts to emphasise people's responsibilities in COVID-19 times, calling for greater citizen action and collaboration.

“People see the government as the giver, and they are the takers,” says the Paro *dzongdag* (governor), Tenzin Thinley, who also heads the municipal authority. Municipal staff and town *thruemis* (elected representatives) note that forums (*zomdues*) are poorly attended. Town representatives lament it's often the “wrong people” who turn up at consultations. They are often sent to represent their employers or family members, and are unable to make decisions.⁹

People's general malaise in engagement with municipal governments is visible in the low voter turn-out for municipal elections. In 2016, only 31% of voters participated in the Thimphu *thromde* elections. Even more significantly, the electorate is restricted to people who are formally registered as landowners in the town. This means there are just 7,275 voters in a city of more than 120,000 residents, although many have made Thimphu their home for decades. Of equal concern is the small voter numbers in Phuntsholing (about 712) and Gelephu (1,121).

⁹ A review of the Local Governance Act confirms the weakness of *zomdues*.

This administrative and electoral flaw needs attention, as the National Statistical Bureau, the World Bank, Bhutan's Press, and those who have worked at the *thromde* have pointed out. When votes are given only to people who are originally registered in Thimphu, it excludes everyone else living in the city.

“For a town like Thimphu, the mayor's position is as important as a deputy minister's,” says a former Thimphu *thromde* executive engineer, Phuntsho Gyeltshen, now CEO of a corporate construction company. “TCC is responsible for the development of a capital city; it's a big job that warrants a skilled team.” It is also hard for a mayor to have control over staff who are answerable only to the civil service. “The mayor does not have the power to hire and fire his team,” said a former candidate for the mayor's post.

Building the Community

A model of a more participatory citizenry and inclusive approach to urban development is a joint project of the Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy with the Paro and Samdrup Jongkhar municipal authorities.

The Project Citizen (mi-khung) Building Community brought together, for the first time, civil servants, municipal staff, residents, civil society representatives, teachers, schools, youth and local leaders to envision a future for their towns.¹⁰ They did this by mapping their neighbourhoods, identifying the assets in their communities, ranging from infrastructure to role models who have contributed to societal good, and came up with solutions to address local needs. The project enabled residents and decision-makers to envision what they would like their town to be and, for the first-time, to begin work collectively towards that vision.¹¹

“It's been very useful, as people take more ownership of the town, and many people who would otherwise complain about the *thromde*, are now talking to us and suggesting solutions to problems,” said the Paro district administrator, and municipal head.

¹⁰The 2 town visioning workshops are different from the (district) *dzongkhag* visioning exercises that tend to take place only amongst *dzongkhag* staff and civil servants.

¹¹This visioning practise is typically done only for the districts and does not involve residents, civil society members, and there is no separate visioning exercise for townships.

More than 90 people from a cross-section of Paro society met to discuss the vision of “A safe, green, clean and culturally vibrant Paro town”. Its mission is “To nurture a healthy, peaceful, inclusive and sustainable community living in harmony.”

Samdrup Jongkhar’s town vision is “A GNH-based commercial hub in Eastern Bhutan.” Among the several missions is the decision “to strengthen collaboration amongst stakeholders, investing in recreational facilities, capitalising on social cohesion and adopting more participatory approaches to urban development.”

The project enabled youths, teachers and local leaders to address social issues, from overall safety issues and lack of recreation, to waste management and a need to improve conditions for stray animals, and inadequate jobs for youths. The challenge is to take this discourse further and to enable people and local governments to realise their mission.

The project showed people how to look for strengths in their communities -- role models, people who contributed to the public good, and civil society organisations that work to fulfil needs in the town. Studies found that those who learnt to map their neighbourhoods are better able to understand local concerns and needs. “There was a resident, an artist, who suggested keeping Paro green by including rice fields into the town. It’s a great idea and I’ll use it when the time comes,” says the Paro *Thruemi*, Deki Lham, who noted that including residents in town hall meetings gave them new, useful perspectives for town development.

This initiative enables citizens to learn to work with municipal planners and engineers and actively seek citizens’ views. The local CSOs, Police representatives and local leaders engage in open deliberations, focused on the “town” and how to create a healthy community. Implementing the various activities led to a greater sense of “citizenship” while local governments learnt to listen to citizens, and enabled them to contribute to the betterment of communities. The project resulted in many local activities¹² undertaken by resident youths:

- revitalising water sources
- adding streetlights to enhance safety of residents

¹² Reports on the many Building Community project activities can be found on www.bcmbd.bt

- the building of public futsal and volleyball facilities for youths
- a book drive for the local youth centre and schools
- organisation of a youth festival in Paro town to provide recreation for youths
- piloting a recycling and paper making project

Safety concerns

As urban dwellers grow in numbers, many are concerned about safety and have turned to closed circuit TV's (CCTV) to monitor brawls, vandalism and other crimes. This could help, but CCTVs are used by large cities and slum areas globally where there's insufficient public safety. With the small population, is Bhutan making enough effort to create safe urban environments?

Not long ago, the Royal Bhutan Police planned to develop neighbourhood watches involving residents to monitor their communities, but these were unsuccessful as people were not forthcoming. Town residents tend to believe that the police are responsible for keeping towns safe.

Nightlife where alcohol flows freely has long been of concern with Bhutan's rising addiction trends. Studies show alcohol as the cause of domestic violence and brawls. The RBP often pleads with bar owners to close earlier, yet the Thimphu Municipal Corporation recently extended the closing time of dance clubs and discos¹³ from 1am to 5am.

This was an example of a lack of consultation with residents and a limited perspective on social safety. Should such decisions be made without consulting families, parents, youths, social organisations, and members of the communities? The *thromde* argued that extending opening hours¹⁴ would reduce "public nuisance", petty crime, and youth misbehaviour, but at what price? Decision-makers have inadvertently encouraged youths to adapt to a nightlife with increased risks.

¹³ The decision to extend the opening hours from 1am to 5am does not apply to drayang nor karaoke centres according to the local press as these centres open 6 nights a week.

¹⁴ The decision was taken after consultation with the operators of the entertainment centres, but no families nor other residents were included in the discussions.

Building Resilient Towns

Keeping in view the challenges raised, how can Bhutan take action to create stronger, more resilient and inclusive urban communities? Some possibilities include the following:

- His Majesty the King has been leading the way with beautification activities. Haa and Samdrup Jongkhar districts have decided to make flower shows an annual event. An appreciation for gardens should flow from these exhibitions into public spaces. Town residents can be encouraged to beautify their surroundings and public spaces.
- Change the current network of community centres into centres where people can engage in meaningful social and cultural activities. Bhutan's community centres focus on providing development services, such as loans and access to government applications online. Our growing towns would benefit from community centres that go beyond transactional services, by becoming the social space where people get to know one another, learn and grow together as communities, thus building trust and connection.

Singapore has a successful example of community centres, first set up in the 1950s, when the government of the small state was creating new public housing that brought together people from various ethnic groups and enclaves. The centres later became Community Clubs that provide programmes like sports, nutrition, crafts, games, and learning, and is aimed at providing “common spaces for people to bond”.¹⁵

- Can we create urban spaces that recognise the identity and assets of different districts? Towns can be socio-ecological-cultural centres, representing the most important elements of Bhutan and the character of each *dzongkhag*. Promote local plants, games, crafts and food; give every town the ability to showcase its identity.

¹⁵ People's Association website. Community Clubs (CCs) are common spaces for people of all races to come together, build friendships and promote social bonding. CCs also connect residents and the Government by providing relevant information and gathering feedback on national concerns and policies. Each CC serves about 15,000 households or an average of 50,000 people

Municipal authorities could hire sociologists and cultural specialists, and inculcate the artists, landscape gardeners, the spiritual seekers, civil society and the creative into town development and in social and aesthetics planning and discussions.

- Go beyond infrastructure and focus on liveability and employment. Do our towns provide for the needs of youths, young children, arts and crafts spaces, etc? There are attempts at promoting yoga in the park, the building of cycling tracks and outdoor gyms in Thimphu. Make healthy family-oriented recreation centres and affordable public facilities a priority rather than leaving it to the private sector to provide for futsal fields, bars and night life, for want of ideas.
- Concentrate on emerging urban poverty and begin focusing on safe and affordable housing, and on creating employment. Bring CSOs on board in these discussions to find real solutions.
- With global awareness on climate change, disaster management and COVID-19 and other health threats, Bhutan's networks of communities can weigh in and support the population in times of need. Desuups are being trained, and a national service is in the pipeline. Civil society volunteers are learning various skills to cope with any potential community health outbreak. The networks created -- counsellors, volunteers, community guardians -- are being strengthened. Municipal authorities can harness the energy and networks to grow a more cohesive and resilient township. Get them on board to start neighbourhood watches, include more residents in town councils and advisory groups.

Unused to open deliberations, residents tend to become spectators and complainers. The process of involving people in town plans and policies can be stepped up, particularly in Thimphu where the nation's decision-makers, civil servants, civil society groups and business sectors are based.

- Enlarge the electoral pool of voters in Thimphu and Phuntsholing (the two largest towns) to give the *thromde* more incentives to reach out to their residents to work on developing more sustainable, resilient and culturally vibrant towns.

The COVID-19 crisis, in numerous ways, has brought the world to its knees, but a backhanded benefit has been the stark reminder of times and trends going wrong. A growing realisation is that humanity has been consuming the planet and is thus facing the wrath of nature. Urban living, now considered inevitable, is one of the many examples of the human population moving away from nature, physically and in many other ways. Individuals, communities, societies, and nations are realising that man and nature have to live in co-existence, what Buddhism calls interdependence. And interdependence is the essence of Gross National Happiness. Here's Bhutan's opportunity to enhance quality of life in an increasingly urban environment.

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