

Niels Gutschow. 2011. *Architecture of the Newars: A History of Building Typologies and Details in Nepal* (Three vols.). Chicago: Serindia Publications.

First of all, I should confess I am not an architect but a theatre person. My interest in Newar architecture developed out of my research on the performance cultures of the Kathmandu Valley. I personally believe that the *pāramparik* architecture of the Valley is probably the first mature and creative medium that the people residing there mastered over a long period of time as a means of expression to each other and as a formation

created for what may be called a human dyad with the deities. To me, classical Newar architecture is a manifestation of various built forms such as caitya, temple, palace, step wells and so on. And these are the sources of inspiration and confidence for any person engaged in creative contemplation in this corner of the earth. The purpose of writing this review of the *Architecture of the Newars* (in three volumes) written by a senior German architect and researcher is to highlight the narrative threads about the activities which have directly and indirectly shaped the heritage of Newar architecture. Gutschow's tome familiarizes its readers with various political and cultural forces instrumental in the making of the architecture of the Valley. And to articulate this, Gutschow brings clues from myths, religions, jātrās and festivals, and histories which the denizens of the Valley have lived for ages. Importantly, he presents Newar architecture as narrations of the nations which have come to settle down here in the Valley.

The tome contains "measured drawings and photographs" of several architecturally important creations from the Valley on an abundant scale. These materials make readers realize two important issues: first, they have been created and accumulated over 40 years from 1971 to 2011 and second, they hold great historical and research value. As significant texts they articulate the change and transformations taken in the domain of Newar architecture of the Valley. Together the drawings (created by Vijaya Basukala) and photographs project the efforts, energies, and anxieties that Gutschow as a documenter and interpreter has spent in collecting and creating them. The first volume begins with the justification of the rationale behind using the drawings and photographs and ends with the realization that dating of architecture in Nepal remains a very difficult undertaking. The three volumes present historically important watercolor paintings and photographs of various architectural sites and creations of the Valley along with the observations of their original creators. This naturally helps readers to become familiar with the historicity of the understanding that the visitors and researchers had held towards the architectural heritage of the Valley. Moreover, the photos and drawings created and taken in the modern times when compared with the ones of the earlier times make readers realize the changes which have taken place in the architectural configuration of the sites. The projection of the impressions that the orientalists had held towards the arts and cultures of the Valley is followed by Gutschow's further analyzes of the same materials. He critiques the orientalists, noting that their "point of interest was not the buildings' inherent values, because the search for

prototypes and imaginary connections constantly tended to veil the view” (1: 12). To them the Valley was a small lake and India under the British Empire a sea. And by observing and analyzing the Valley’s social structures and artistic creations, they thought they would be able know how to sum up or pass judgements on the Indian arts and society, the sea. As part of countering the assumptions of the earlier scholars, Gutschow argues that the very landscapes of the Valley, and the spiritual and cultural faiths that the people in the past here lived by, functioned as crucial historical and cultural forces which have produced the shapes, sizes, and colors of the Valley’s architectural heritage.

Gutschow puts forward a narrative that, after the Valley became habitable, people set out to provide the landscapes they could see every day with various cultural dimensions. It was from this cultural and spiritual impulse that architecture set out to punctuate the skyline of the Valley. He writes that the desire to create power places in the “third dimension” and “visualising” their significance was “the main impulse of building temples, which eventually turned out to appear as towers” (1: 43). Temples or shrines on the top of various high points of land became the Valley’s earliest architectural landmarks. Following Gutschow’s lead, we come to realize that Valley architecture emerged out of the very process of culturification, or mapping the geography into cultural zones. As part of their faith, people regarded certain points with the Valley’s landscape as sacred zones. And this resulted in the development of temples, pithas, and shrines and, importantly, festivals and processions. These were also the times when people lived with the aspiration of mythifying the Valley through constructing temples and caityas and other forms of shrines based on the popular myths about the genesis of the Valley. As a result “three dimensional architectural form” developed “with or without an interior space” (1: 60). Thus myths, religions, and cultural occasions are crucial factors to explore the architectural heritage of the pre- and Licchavi periods. Moreover, it is during festivals and cultural occasions associated with myths and spiritual faiths that past urban settlements are reborn every season in the Valley and their memories perpetuated even to the present times. For example, the occasions of the Biskeṭ jātrā and Daśāī bring the urban rituals of renewal for Bhaktapur to the fore. During these occasions, Bhaktapur’s history of urban settlement comes to be dramatized. Similarly, it is on the occasion of the jatra of Buṅgedyah (Matsyendranāth) that the contours of the human settlements of the Malla period part of Patan and their architecture get projected. And, it is during the Indrajaatra that

Kathmandu's Malla period human settlements come to get dramatized. Even the palaces and human settlements adjacent to them at Nuwakot and Gorkha, which evoke the varieties of the Newar architecture, become very dominant on the occasions of local jattras, festivals, and annual processions. Thus Gutschow makes readers realize that festivals and jattras play important roles in mapping out the human settlements of the Newars of the earlier period.

Gutschow's three volumes contain architectural narratives of various nations which have come to settle down in the Valley so far. Historically important kings and prime ministers come as secondary characters to highlight the main plot, i.e., the narration of the continuation and changes which have taken place in the domain of Newar architecture. To enable his readers to have a glance at the grandeur of the early architectural creations of the Valley, Gutschow takes them as far away as Tibet. Though there did exist a rich heritage of architecture in the Licchavi period in the Valley—as there are some “300 architectural fragments,” “lingas,” and “caityas” which we can come across—they are mere “fragments of the early architecture” and cannot make us realize the grandeur of the architectural skills which artisans in the Valley had achieved by the Licchavi period. And to illustrate the grandeur of the architecture of the early Licchavi period of the Valley, Gutschow familiarizes his readers with the architectural attributes of the Lhasa Jokhnag temple that was built on the orders of the Nepali Princess Bhrikuti (627–650). It is at this temple that Gutschow makes his readers imagine or visualize the now lost architectural heritage of the Kathmandu Valley. He writes, “The figural and foliage details of the entrance, however, display faint similarity to Licchavi prototypes, and may have been produced by Tibetan craftsmen sometime after those called from Nepal had left” (1: 189).

As readers move from section to section, they come to realize that major political and cultural changes in Nepal are reflected in the Valley's changing architectural heritage. For example, caityas and lingas had dominated the Licchavi period. But it was the Bāhās, the community buildings, which “arose during the transitional period.” With the end of the transitional period “a wide range of new window types evolved” as well as “struts,” “arches,” and “step-wells” (hiti). Moreover, caityas in the Valley developed into many varieties. The one with lotus motif “re-emerged in the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century” reflecting “the sacred geography of the Kathmandu Valley” and this motif “developed further in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century in Patan” (3: 923) but the “sumeru type of

caitya” is one that has come to “dominate in the last 150 years” in the Valley (3: 931). With Gutschow’s tome, readers make an epic journey down the lanes of the architectural history of the Newars.

The second volume of Gutschow’s work continues to unfold the narrations about the activities in the domain of Newar architecture. It traces the major past activities, which either gave continuity to the spatial configuration of the earlier period or added new spaces and architectural elements and spatial features in the Valley. He writes that, by the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Hindu monastic institutions (maṭhas) that enjoyed royal support came to dominate the eastern center around the Dattatreya temple in Bhaktapur (1: 78). He writes that Bhaktapur has experienced the continuation of spatial configuration. Whereas the human settlements and architecture of Patan of the Malla period give an impression of the adaptations, Kathmandu during the regime of the Pratap Malla and that of Bhimsen Thapa gives the readers an impression that it aimed to “present itself as the centre of rising regional power” through expanding palaces and constructing temples of greater forms (2: 337). Gutschow’s tome thus provides its readers some secret doors and windows to look at the great historical trajectories which the Valley’s Newar architecture has carved out and passed through.

It was mainly tiered temples which came to punctuate the skyline of the Valley during the Malla and the Shah period. Though tiered temples are important Newar architectural forms, they have remained little researched. This is not because researchers have not shown any interest in them, but because of the very cultural contexts in which such temples were constructed. Since most of them were constructed due to “impressive royal donations,” the multi-stepped plinths of the temples have remained “virtually removed from the people’s life” (2: 352). In several temples access to the general public is not allowed. This has barred one from becoming familiar with the architectural attributes of such temples. As a result, superstition rather than research-oriented assumptions have shaped the public psyche about the architecture of these temples. And this has damaged serious understanding about the temple architecture in detail.

While locating and describing the tiered temples of the Valley, Gutschow tackles the diversity of such temple architecture. He takes readers through a jungle of details. He takes them from tier to tier and makes them gaze from one strut to another, one window to the next. He makes them follow beam after beam, from colonnettes to vidhyadharas, the flying wisdom bearers, and also to the torana and finally makes

readers circumambulate the temple. His untiring reading of the tiered temples is descriptive, narrative, and critical, thus providing a *thick* observation of this form of Newar architecture. He walks up and down the historical lanes to discuss the architectural and spatial configurations of the tiered temples, sharing his unparalleled forty years of acute study and analysis of Newar architecture. I cite the following text to reveal the amount of energy that he has spent in collecting and concentrating the architectural details of the tiered temples of the Valley:

The struts of the early 14<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> century two tiered temples are 320 centimeters long and canted at an angle of 40 to 43 degrees. The bottom of the strut rests on projecting bricks of a complex cornice, the top supports the strut rail (calu). With the development of temples with an outer ambulatory the struts measured only 230 centimetres and were canted at an angle of 38 degrees (visvesvara). Unprofessional restorations after 1934 earthquake increased the angle of the struts to 55 degrees (2: 394).

There are several sections in the tome which only architects can benefit from or can properly understand. But to readers like me, these sections made me ponder the immense energies one should possess to conduct any serious research work in the domain of Newar architecture.

The “platforms and arcades” section from the second volume is very fascinating. Here Gutschow surveys the location, numbers, and multiple purposes of various platforms and arcades found around Newar settlements of the Valley. He writes “300 such arcaded spaces are found in Patan, 150 in Bhaktapur and even 28 in a small place such as Panauti” (2: 625). Readers come to realize the importance that the Newars have given to public open spaces in their communities. It is at such spaces where performances of various types take place. It is a well-known fact that *Ḍabu* platforms constitute an inseparable element of Newar urban space. For example, the one in Bhaktapur where *Gāijātrā* performances take place, the one where the *Kartiknach* at Patan takes place, the one at Panauti where troupes from *Harisidhhi* and *Bhaktapur* go to perform, and the one in Kathmandu where *Harisidhinaach* takes place: these have become the core of the performance cultures of the Valley. Furthermore, Gutschow writes that out of such spaces “Every third *phalca* has been established to create space for the regular or seasonal performance of music” (2: 632). Thus, it reveals the intricate relationship between Newar architecture and performance cultures.

Newar architectural narratives keep on unfolding throughout the tome. They make readers realize the historical phases through which Newar architecture has passed. For example, we can take the *caitya* in this

regard. The caityas and lingas of the pre-Licchavi period were smaller in size. But it was only in the Malla period, especially from the 17<sup>th</sup> century, that bigger caityas and lingas start to appear: “Most Licchavi caityas could easily be lustrated by devotees and vermilion and oil readily offered to the Tathagatas in their niches below the dome. With the development of new types in the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the dome dwindled to insignificant and became out of reach” (2: 686). Gutschow keeps on providing historical perspectives from which to look at changes and transformations. He analyzes and shares his findings that Malla and early Shah period architectural activities concentrated in the core parts of the city but after Prithvinarayan Shah passed his throne to his son, the activities in the domain of Newar architecture gradually shifted towards the banks of the river. Evoking this shift, Gutschow writes, “The turning away from the urban centres to the rivers, and framing its banks architecturally, reflected an overwhelming effort to imitate the sacred topography of Benaras as it re-emerged as the prominent pilgrimage centre of the subcontinent from the 1770s around” (2: 641).

The last volume familiarizes readers with the architectural activities that shaped the Valley’s cityscape from the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century onward. Gutschow provides several architectural vocabularies and perspectives to look at the complicated history of Nepali politics. He interprets the new political age that had come to settle down in the Valley after Prithvinarayan Shah conquered the Valley in the following manner: “The generals followed suit and established their mansions—still on a modest scale—within the urban core of Kathmandu, completed with bluster columns and fanlights” (3: 793). 19<sup>th</sup> century Nepali politics moved ahead with feuds and conspiracies. But architecturally speaking, such political changes resulted in “large window openings, white plaster, and balconies” as “the dominating features of the architecture of the 19<sup>th</sup> century” (3: 843). Gutschow identifies the architectural sites and features which brought innovations to Newar architecture in the Shah period. He writes, “The first building to incorporate pointed arches crafted in plaster was introduced at the end of 18<sup>th</sup> century, probably based on prototypes Bahadur Shah encountered in North India” (3: 793). For few decades, the “Lucknow influence” dominated in the temple and palace architecture of Valley in the Shah period. Many temples with domed roofs came to punctuate the Kathmandu city skyline.

The beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was, in many ways, an interesting period as “the Newar craftsmen absorbed whatever the Kushan, Gupta, and latterly the Moghul court of North India had to offer in decorative

motifs and structural forms.” Mid-19<sup>th</sup> century innovations were “far more extensive” as it was the period, especially from 1860–1870, when “several temple complexes, the style of which kept mixing Newar woodwork, Lucknavi extravagancies, and a pilastered order reminiscent of the East Indian Company’s neo-classicism” (3: 794) came to flourish in the Valley. To highlight the contours of architectural changes, Gutschow takes readers to some specific locations. He writes, “The first building to break with the conventions of Newar architecture is the north wing of Patan Palace” as “A large gate, hitherto unknown in Newar architecture, rose up to two storeys’ high to allow elephants to enter the backyard, where the stables were created” (3: 843). This change took place sometime between 1785 and 1794 during Bahadur Shah’s rule. The coming of Bhimsen Thapa to power in 1806 provided continuity to Newar architecture as well as introducing Lucknavi elements into its repertoire: “The introduction of glassed casement windows framed by engaged colonnettes and cusped arches in Mughal style, all in white stucco, marks the decisive turn in architecture of the Valley” (3: 845).

The architectural activities in Kathmandu turned a different direction after the Samser line of succession took place in in the 1880s especially after Bir Samser Rana came to the power in 1885. “In the beginning he ruled from Bhimsen Thapa’s Bagh Durbar, to which a wing had been added in neo-Gothic style in a faint echo of the British Residency. But within a short time, from 1888 to 1898, he had eight extensive palaces constructed” (3: 794). By the time the Rana regime fell there were already forty palaces, all built in neoclassical or Asian Baroque style in the Valley, and they formed the core of the major activities in the Valley. Roads were built connecting one Rana palace with the others. In this section Gutschow makes his readers ponder over the architectural skills and talents that Newar artisans demonstrated as they created not only the biggest palace in Asia but also ones with grand forms and sophisticated architectural attributes. Bir Samser Rana had a strong impulse to construct palaces. “Within little more than a decade from 1888 to 1900, Bir established himself as the most prolific builder in the history of Nepal” (3: 855). Gutschow does not only focus on Rana palaces, which brought a new architectural imaginaire to the Valley, but also on the houses of commoners. He describes the “paltanghar” from Kathmandu, “the Amatya house” and the Dhakva house” from Patan to highlight how private houses and buildings show the continuity and change dimensions of the architectural heritage of the Newars.



Finally, the tome highlights activities which have brought changes to Newar architecture in the late twentieth century. The second half of the twentieth century, seen from the perspective of Newar architecture, concentrated on renovation and preservation of various architecturally important palaces and temples. This was also the period when lots of money and energy were spent in carving out master plans to herald a new age of urban planning in the Valley. Gutschow believes that town planning in the Valley presents a paradox. The first attempt itself took place in the south and eastern part of the Hanuman Dhoka Durbar Square (HDDS) that brought major intervention to the Newar architecture and human settlements in Kathmandu from 1930s, especially after the 1934 earthquake. The planning in no time made the HDDS area chaotic. The final section of the last volume critiques several attempts that the government tried to herald as “urban planning” in the Valley but which did not get materialized.

To conclude, Gutschow’s *Architecture of the Newars* enables readers to realize that the heritage of the *pāramparik* architecture of the Valley is still alive. The architecture of the Newars, despite all political deadlocks and economic depravities, is here to meet all challenges and influences and to flourish. It is not going to melt into thin air because it is part of everyday life as well the myths and spiritual values people here have lived or do live with. Nations may continue to rise and fall but the architecture of the Newars will keep registering changes and continuity. Gutschow’s tome indirectly makes its readers feel happy and hopeful about the future of Newar architecture.

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