

Niels Gutschow and Hermann Kreutzmann. 2013. *Mapping the Kathmandu Valley with Aerial Photographs by Erwin Schneider*. Kathmandu: Himal Books

Niels Gutschow. 2012. *The Kathmandu Valley: New Buildings, Sites under Construction and Demolition 1990-2011*. Kathmandu: Himal Books

These two volumes, closer in form to coffee table books than academic monographs, offer two photographic journeys that pictorially depict various metropolitan and architectural trends in the Kathmandu Valley. While specialized scholars might well read these books hoping for a more analytical or theoretical approach, the volumes complement each other well, speak to a wider audience, and simultaneously make several subtle contributions to urban scholarship in Nepal.

In *Mapping the Kathmandu Valley: With Aerial Photographs by Erwin Schneider*, Niels Gutschow and Hermann Kreutzmann offer over 100 aerial photographs of the Kathmandu Valley taken by “the eminent map-maker” (p. 57) Erwin Schneider in the 1970s. Selected from over 500 pictures re-discovered in a tin can at the Technical University of Munich, the authors aim “to present the original photographs in the context of map-making and urban development” (p. 5). Part I of the book (‘The Kathmandu Valley’) presents these contexts through a series of sub-sections. It begins with ‘Geology–Climate–Hydrology,’ in which the authors discuss the Kathmandu Valley vis-à-vis the British East India Company’s 19<sup>th</sup> century quest to find the “natural frontier” of the colonial ecumene. They make insightful comparisons and contrasts to the Kashmir Valley on this point. Because scholars have a tendency to focus on Nepal’s autonomy from the British Raj, this discussion is interesting in that it squarely situates the urban development of the Kathmandu Valley within its larger geopolitical context. The section concludes with some dismal, though not altogether new, facts about the population boom and water shortages continually facing the cities of the valley.

The authors then proceed to describe the long-term settlement process of the valley, reviewing the well-known origin myths about the draining of the ancient lake, the ancient civilizations of the valley (Kirati, Gupta, and Licchavi), through the Malla kingships, to the modern history of the Shahs and Ranas, and finally through the post-1951 forces that continue shaping the urban landscape today. Here again, the content is not radically new,

and scholars will probably know much of this history already. The Shahs altered the Malla palace in Kathmandu, “imposing wings of a hitherto unseen monumentality” (p. 17). The Thapas and Ranas changed the settlement pattern fundamentally by constructing their palaces on the urban periphery, and the Shamsheer branch of the Ranas accelerated the palatial building spree. After the fall of the Ranas, as development workers and tourists descended on Nepal, many such palaces “were converted into offices of a new administration” (p. 18). So, while this information was not previously unknown, their presentation cautions scholars against positing any clear break when urbanization ‘began’ (e.g., post-1760s, post-1846, post-1951, or post-1990). Instead, their discussion invites us to deeply historicize the valley as a way of understanding contemporary urban trends, without succumbing to the all-too-common and all-too-simplistic narratives of ‘lost Shangri-la’ or of ‘coming modernity.’

Despite this subtle cautioning, the authors acknowledge the notable changes that occurred in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, when free-standing houses began to appear beyond the traditional urban core. In the third sub-section of Part I, the authors briefly sketch the history of urban planning and town development in the valley, focusing primarily on the period after 1956, when the “General Construction Office” became the “Ministry of Public Works” (p. 24). They proceed to discuss the foreign planners who came in with their ‘expert’ knowledge that was often ethnocentric, pedantic, and dismissive of traditional architecture: “The planner appears as an expert who pursues global, not local, development goals, and if that does not work it is the inadequate response of ‘the locals’ who spoil his noble deals” (p. 24). Critiques of development are far from new in Nepal Studies, but reiterating this critique directly in the context of urban planning makes it a useful contribution. Beyond the state’s plans, the authors also sketch the rise of private land developer companies that began to develop housing colonies on the urban periphery in the late 1980s (p. 30). This interfacing of private land developers, state planners, and international development workers has facilitated the apparent sprawl and disorder of the valley, which “turns fields into building plots, footpaths into roads, and replaces historic structures with new ones that are higher and bulkier” (p. 31). All of this has only been exacerbated by the expansion of brick production in the 1970s and the increased availability of foreign materials like cement and reinforcement rods. In all of this is a thinly veiled critique of un-/under-regulated housing

markets and land uses, through which international planners are “unable to find answers to a process that is exclusively regulated by the market” (p. 35). The final two subsections of Part I offer a history of mapping in the Kathmandu Valley and a brief biography of Erwin Schneider, respectively.

Gutschow and Kreutzmann do an excellent job of covering a wide range of material in such a short word count. One could offer two relatively minor critiques of this work. First, in Part I, it is not always easy to figure out which version of a map is being discussed. The text does not reference figure numbers, and the images in this section are identified only by long captions. Those interested in particularity will probably find themselves doing quite a bit of page-turning and close (re-)reading of captions to correlate the images with the textual discussions. Second, I was left wishing the authors had staked a more critical claim in their discussion. We are told of plans for more crosswalks, rapid mass transit, flyovers, and the restoration of the Bagmati River, yet we are rarely given the authors’ stances on these issues. The only clear indication is in their celebration of Bires Shah, who developed an innovative plan to transform several junctions on the Ring Road into sub-cities of their own. Still, one is left speculating about their thoughts on the broader debates they chart. At the most basic level, the authors do not weigh in on what the *goal* of such planning schemes (or lack thereof) ought to be: Aesthetics? Development? Tradition? Functionality? Furthermore, *whose* aesthetic taste and *whose* tradition? Development and functionality *for whom*? Surely, these are complicated and controversial questions that might better be addressed elsewhere, but some framing discussion would have been welcome. To be fair, this editorial/authorial choice seems deliberate, and, while unfortunate in some ways, it ultimately leads to one of the greatest contributions of these books (discussed below). Furthermore, these two criticisms can largely be explained by the genre/medium of the book, which does not make claims at critical scholarship and seems to be appealing to a wider audience.

Part II (‘Documentation of Aerial Photographs’) comprises the bulk of the volume in its presentation of Schneider’s photographs from the 1970s. In addition to their other merits, the pictures are aesthetically beautiful bird’s-eye views of the Kathmandu Valley. Beyond this artistic value, the authors note that the photographs “preserve an image of the Kathmandu Valley that is of historical value and provides a salient reference point for comparison” (p. 5). To this end, Part II includes the flight paths along which

particular sets of images were produced, making it quite easy to orient the photographs geographically. This allows readers to quickly and easily see what a specific area looked like from above in the 1970s, and this historical value is important. The comparative project proved to be the most interesting, useful, and enjoyable part of reading this book. Because the altitude and location of each photograph is so clearly presented, this reviewer spent much time using GoogleEarth images to see views of particular areas almost exactly 40 years apart. The visuality of this project leaves one with a visceral understanding of the scale of urban sprawl, even in a way that the myriad statistics, op-eds, and academic articles have not done.

The second book, *The Kathmandu Valley: New Buildings, Sites under Construction and Demolition 1990–2011* by Niels Gutschow alone, offers precious little text and is almost entirely photographic. *The Kathmandu Valley* offers a scalar variation on the same theme as *Mapping the Kathmandu Valley*, opposing the latter's aerial, bird's-eye images to the former's street-level perspective. It begins by describing the factors – availability of new building materials and “growing social and spatial mobility” (p. v) – that accelerated the urbanization process by the 1980s. Gutschow then presents nearly 200 black-and-white photographs of construction sites and recently constructed or demolished buildings. The timeframe in which these images were produced (1990–2011) was one of rapid demographic and political change. Taken by Gutschow himself, the photographs are beautiful in a mundane sort of way. Much like the photos of the other volume, they are also useful for comparative purposes. The documentation catalogues the location of each photo, thereby making it possible to retrace Gutschow's steps and chart for oneself the relentless dynamism of the Kathmandu Valley's urban landscape. The images are presented “without any correction designed to ‘improve’ or ‘beautify’ the view” (p. v), and very little explanation or description is given about the photographs. On the one hand, this strategy of minimal curation often leaves the images feeling a bit decontextualized, even from the surrounding urban landscape in which they were produced. While the photo essay in the introduction does draw attention to some of the notable trends illuminated by these buildings, I would have liked Gutschow's expertise to come to bear on the images a bit more. On the other hand, this presentation style allows the photos to breathe and to speak for themselves, unencumbered by the weight of heavy-handed analysis.

Notwithstanding my earlier hope to see the authors engage more critically with these materials, these books present a portrait of the Kathmandu Valley in a refreshingly dispassionate way. In the introduction to *The Kathmandu Valley*, Gutschow reflexively discusses the production of images of Nepal, long the recipient of exoticizing Western gazes. He describes the fact that, while photographic documentation of Nepal is nothing new, many/most of these have been fundamentally orientalist in their search for “picturesque” scenes that favor a “romantic, emotional attitude and a belief in the power of planning” (p. ix). In *Mapping the Kathmandu Valley*, Gutschow and Kreutzmann describe the tension between “paradisiacal beauty” and “commercialization” at the heart of many urban planning schemes. From Austrian UN advisor Carl Pruscha’s dismissal of peripheral development as a “visual crime” (p. 24) to the post-WWII perspective that transformed Newar cities into “an object of nostalgic feelings” (p. 29), developers and planners have struggled to make judgments that neither romanticize the past (while bemoaning new constructions) nor celebrate development (while dismissing tradition).

Gutschow seems to deliberately sidestep this issue in favor of a more documentary, rather than analytical, approach to the images:

The curiosity I feel about this ongoing development has nothing denunciatory about it. The documentation of the construction sites does reveal a certain crudity, not to say brutality. It is not meant to represent the romantic gaze. Its aim is to achieve a largely unemotional presentation of one aspect of reality. I come from a social and cultural background that not only favours but actively worships order and denounces ambivalence. It is therefore the all-pervading spirit of incompleteness, the omnipresence of structures in the making that fascinates me. (p. v)

This, it seems to me, is the most crucial and understated contribution of these two volumes. While scholars might well wish for more history, more analysis, and more curation of the photographs, the authors consciously avoid this in order to let the images tell their own story. Numerous oversized books have been published containing beautiful artistic photographs of traditional Newar architecture and the Kathmandu Valley’s countless temples. However, one gets the sense that the urban spaces Gutschow documents are truer to the Kathmandu Valley in the sense that he portrays an urban landscape that is far from ancient, and in which people actually live. Of course, many might aesthetically prefer the ancient religious and traditional domestic architecture

of the valley, but this is precisely beside the point. These volumes do not bemoan urban sprawl and non-traditional design, nor do they foolishly celebrate these as modernity and development finally arriving in Nepal. Conversely, they do not denounce tradition as many planners have done, nor do they long for a pristine past of some long-gone Golden Age. The perspective offered in these two books presents the valley not as it was, nor as it could be, nor as Westerners have long imagined it. Rather, it presents the Kathmandu Valley as it is.

As separate volumes, these books contain wonderful photographs that scholars and others will simply enjoy viewing. While the volumes do contain some new information, the real strength of the short texts is in their concise and clear presentations, making them some of the most useful introductions to Nepali urban space that this reviewer has come across. One hopes that more in-depth studies will follow in this vein, perhaps with a more conceptual and theoretical approach.

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