

NEWAR ARCHITECTURE

The typology of the Malla period monuments of the Kathmandu Valley

INTRODUCTION: NEPAL AND THE KATHMANDU VALLEY

Nepal is a country with an old culture steeped in deeply ingrained tradition. Political, trade and dynastic relations with both neighbours – India and Tibet, have been intense for hundreds of years. The most important of the smaller states existing in the current territorial borders of Nepal is that of the Kathmandu Valley. This valley has been one of the most important points on the main trade route between India and Tibet. Until the late 18th century, the wealth of the Kathmandu Valley reflected in the golden roofs of numerous temples and the monastic structures adorned by artistic bronze and stone sculptures, woodcarving and paintings was mainly gained from commerce. Being the point of intersection of significant trans-Himalaya trade routes, the Kathmandu Valley was a centre for cultural exchange and a place often frequented by Hindu and Buddhist teachers, scientists, poets, architects and sculptors.¹⁾

The Kathmandu Valley with its main cities of Kathmandu, Patan and Bhaktapur is situated in the northeast of Nepal at an average height of 1350 metres above sea level. Today it is still the administrative, cultural and historical centre of Nepal. South of the valley lies a mountain range of moderate height whereas the lofty peaks of the Himalayas are visible in the North.

¹⁾ Dębicki (1981: 11–14).

The main group of inhabitants of the Kathmandu Valley are the Newars, an ancient and high organised ethnic group very conscious of its identity. The Newars are well known for their artistic skills. Almost everything that is commonly called Nepalese art – architecture, sculpture, painting, arts and crafts, and music – is in fact Newar art²⁾.

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The Kathmandu Valley is the part of Nepal where the variety of architectonic styles is remarkable. Only a few monuments have survived from the earliest times. They consist of *stupas*³⁾ and *chortens* erected mainly during the Licchavi period (300–879 CE). However the most spectacular monuments of the valley are those that date back to the 17th century, erected during the Malla period (1200–1768 CE)⁴⁾.

The Malla period witnessed the culmination of the greatest achievements of art, architecture and culture in the Kathmandu Valley. As a result, it is considered the golden period of Nepalese art. The early monarchs of the Malla Dynasty were known as great patrons of art⁵⁾. Pratap Malla of Kathmandu, Siddhi Narsimha Malla of Patan and Bhupatindra Malla of Bhaktapur competed with each other for the beautification of their kingdoms by adorning them up with new magnificent temples. This competition existed not only between the monarchs but also amongst the Newar craftsmen living in the three cities⁶⁾. The traditional Newar buildings – common houses, palaces, temples, monasteries, public shelters and other types of community structures are composed in a unified architectural Newar style.

The common features of all traditional Newar buildings are their construction and details as well as proportions of individual elements of a building such as windows, doors, walls, pillars and beams, of which all of them are richly carved. Newar woodcarving is known to be one of the most elaborate of its kind in the world. Building materials – the special kinds of brick, roof tiles, wood

²⁾ Giełżyński (2001: 71–72).

³⁾ The most important of them are two the biggest *stupas* of the Kathmandu Valley: Swayambhunath and Boudhanath. The smaller *stupas* and *chortens* number about a few thousand.

⁴⁾ Pradhan (1996: 49–50)

⁵⁾ Samusik (1993: 21).

⁶⁾ Pradhan (1996: 49–50).

and clay are used in the same way in every kind of Newar monument⁷⁾. Metal (usually cooper) can be found in the more elaborate buildings, as a final roof covering, or as repoussé cladding for wooden reliefs⁸⁾. The use of silver is rather more exceptional⁹⁾.

Due to the fact that the monuments of the Kathmandu Valleys were created mainly by Newars, most of the terms being used to describe Nepalese architecture are taken from the Newari language¹⁰⁾.

NEWAR TEMPLES

The most characteristic monuments of the Kathmandu Valley are temples crowned with several roof tiers (Figure 1). The local name of the temple is *mandir* (Nepali) or *dega* (Newari). The Newari word *dega* originates from the Sanskrit term *Devagriha*, meaning “God’s House”. The *dega* temple is commonly described as a multi-storey construction but in fact there is usually only one usable floor space – the ground floor occupied by the *cella* (called *gabagriha*). Only in the case of a few temples does the shrine containing the deity lie on an upper floor¹¹⁾.

Usually the temples were built on square plans, rarely on rectangular or octagonal ones. The main part of the monument is a *cella* built out of brick, placed on the multi-step pedestal.

The roofs, piled up, supported by richly carved roof struts (*tunalas*), decorated with various symbolic elements is what makes Newar temples unique. The characteristic feature of the roofs of the *dega* temple are their slightly raised eaves. The lowest roof is decorated with small bells hanging along the eaves, with leaf-shaped brassy clappers moved by the wind and used to call passers-by to worship. The alternative to the bells is *kinkinimala* – the metal bar running along the eaves, decorated with little metal flags, rattles or small bronze decorations. The corners where the eaves meet can be decorated with details in the shape of birds, animals’ heads, or tails of the peacock. The top roof of the *dega* temple is crowned with a bell-shaped pinnacle called a *gajur*, or with a group of three gilded spires. The umbrella symbolising the deity’s protection can be placed above the *gajur* or the spires.

⁷⁾ Korn (1976: 104), Slusser 1974: 170).

⁸⁾ Particularly beautiful metal details can be found on the spouts of public fountains.

⁹⁾ Harle (1986: 178).

¹⁰⁾ Korn (1976: 104).

¹¹⁾ Korn (1976: 66).

Another characteristic element of the Nepalese *dega* temple is a *pataka* – the thin shiny metal ribbon, falling from the top of the highest roof to the eaves of the lowest roof of the temple (Figure 2). The *pataka* isn't only a decorative element but it symbolises the deity's path when he travels to Earth to visit his worshippers.

The main entrance of the temple is always decorated with richly carved wooden doors crowned with an arch called a *torana*. The access to the shrine is protected by stone statues of guardians, standing on the steps of the pedestal. The guardians can be lions, elephants, humans or deities. The constant element accompanying the Shiva temple is a statue of the bull Nandin – the god's vehicle. Next to the Vishnu temple, there is always a statue of the winged creature Garuda. The rat is the vehicle of Ganesha represented in front of the shrine dedicated to him. There is a column with the figure of a king or a donor placed directly in front of the *dega* temple. The statue of the main deity or deities are placed inside the temple.¹²⁾

The woodcarving of the *dega* temple constitutes one of the richest and most characteristic expressions of Nepalese art. Thousands of images of doors, windows, pillars and roof struts contribute to a complex, sometimes inscrutable and often unique iconographic program. According to Theophile and Ranjitkar¹³⁾, “this iconographic program is fundamental to the conception and religiosity of the Hindu temple: the constellation of religious symbols and deities reconstructs a cosmological diagram, a *mandala*, and is integral to the architectural structure. Among the Nepalese *dega* temples, one may find some significant variation in the iconographic programs, even of temples dedicated to the same god or goddess. These variation may be understood as a reflection of the local sacred geography, the mythology concerning the particular deity to be housed, the artistic inventiveness of individual carvers, wishes of the donor, or certain programmatic or stylistic conventions, which can be observed by city or period in the Kathmandu Valley”.

Dega temples, are usually named after the gods for whom they were built. Significant diversity in temples' names occurs because of the simultaneous usage of three languages: Sanskrit, Nepali and Newari. Thus, Shiva is also known as Mahadeo, Mahadev, Deo-Deo, and by his different manifestations Pashupati, Jagannath, Shankar, Maheshvar, Nrityeshvar. The place names such as squares or *Tols*, or particular attributes of each *dega* or its environment, could

¹²⁾ Samusik (1993: 82).

¹³⁾ Theophile, Ranjitkar (1992: 111).

be included in their names. Seldom do the physical features of the *dega* contribute to its name, as in the case with Bhaktapur's *Nyatapola Mandir* (Figure 3) – *Nyatapol* means 'building with five roofs'¹⁴).

PALACES

Apart from the temples, the most impressive monuments of the Kathmandu Valley are the King's Palaces of Bhaktapur, Patan and Kathmandu. Each of these palaces was built in the vicinity of a main trade route, close to the city centre, as a complex of connected buildings clustered around a courtyard (*chowk*). The Newar term for the word "palace" is *layku*. Gardens and temples always belong to the palace complex. The most important temple in a complex is the *Taleju Mandir* devoted to the goddess protecting the royal family. The palace complex adjoins the open space of a *Durbar square* – a public space filled with temples¹⁵.

The *Durbar squares* in each of the three large cities of the Kathmandu Valley differ greatly in appearance, according to their position in the city and the grouping and style of the buildings in them. The palaces of Patan and Bhaktapur have not been the residences of the monarch for more than 240 years. When Kathmandu was established as the capital of Nepal by Prithvinarayan Shah in 1770, they lost their function. As long as Nepal was a monarchy (until 2007) the palace of Kathmandu, despite not being the royal seat since 1969, used to come to life on certain ceremonial occasions, particularly those relating to the Royal Family¹⁶. As of today, all three Malla's palaces in the Valley serve as Museums.

The most impressive of the *Durbar squares* of the Valley is that of Patan (Figure 4). In front of the series of decorated palace buildings, with the raised *Degutale Temple*, a number of temples of varying importance are to be found¹⁷. The Palace of Patan was built at the junction of the two main trading streets of the city. The backbone of the palace ensemble, which runs on a north-south axis, is the main facade of the three courtyard buildings and of the *Digutale temple*, which runs a length of 100 meters. There is no organised thoroughfare between the three courtyards. Each *chowk* has its own main gate leading to the square and a smaller one at the rear which leads to the garden. In spite of the different functions of each *chowk*, their overall plans and underlying con-

¹⁴) Korn (1976: 67).

¹⁵) Macdonald, Vergati (1979: 107).

¹⁶) Korn (1976: 50).

¹⁷) Korn (1976: 50).

cepts are similar. All the temples standing in front of the Palace in the *Durbara Square* have been so arranged that either their entrance steps or their main doors face the Palace¹⁸). Fortunately the earthquake of 1934 had little effect on this square, whereas the *Durbara square* of Bhaktapur was badly damaged and lost much of its original character, despite the survival of many important temples¹⁹).

The Bhaktapur Royal Place lies at the northern edge of the town. The Palace complex, includes the gardens and six of the original *chowks*. The Bhaktapur *Durbar Square* is perhaps the best specimen of Malla Palaces. It represents the beauty of Nepalese art, architecture and prosperity of the Malla period. The *Golden Gate* known as *Sun Dhoka*, leading to the *Taleju chowk* and *Kumari chowk*, was erected in 1753 next to the statue of King Bhupatindra Malla and is considered as the most beautiful piece of art in Nepal. The 55-window Palace (Figure 5), dating back to the 17th century, is a masterpiece of Newar woodcarving²⁰).

NEWAR HOUSES

The building style of the Newars is reflected also in the traditional houses following the same construction pattern. According to Korn's analyses²¹, the average Newar house with its basic rectangular design is generally about 6 metres in depth, with a length ranging from 1.5 to 15 metres, although 4 to 8 metres is the norm. A characteristic and universal feature of the Newar house is the vertical room arrangement due to security considerations, and the need to use a little irrigable land for building purposes. Most traditional Newar houses are three-storied structures, however two-storied houses can be found on the town's fringes, and exclusive four-storied ones may be found in the centre of a town. It seems to have been the aim of each Newar family to build one single house around one courtyard. In the majority of cases, however, different units make up the four sides of a *chowk*. At least one house providing access to the street through a gateway. Such an arrangement provides the inhabitants with both security and privacy²²).

¹⁸) Korn (1976: 54); Mcdonald, Vergati (1979, 109–111).

¹⁹) Korn (1976: 50).

²⁰) Korn (1976: 57); Mcdonald, Vergati (1979: 111).

²¹) Korn (1976: 18).

²²) Korn (1976: 18).

The main feature of the facades of the Newar houses is symmetry attained, where possible, on a central axis of a main window or door by pairing windows around the central axis on each succeeding floor. The central window of each floor is emphasised by its size and detailed carving. The ground floor of the house can be used as a shop front or a workshop. The facade of the average ground floor remains quite simply executed with a low narrow door and one or two small windows on either side. Even if there is some asymmetry in the ground floor, the upper stories are arranged independently, in a symmetric fashion. Usually the most decorative element of the facade of Newar house is the great *San Jhya* window in the main living room. It is the most important thoroughfare to the street, other than the door itself. Even in the simplest of houses, the living room windows are always accentuated.²³⁾

MONASTERIES

The Buddhist monasteries of the Kathmandu Valley are known as *Viharas*. A *Vihara* is usually a two-storied court style building. In contrast to the typical free standing Hindu temples and due to its integration into the surrounding architecture, the *Vihara* remains relatively inconspicuous and often unrecognised. There are over four hundred *Viharas* in the Kathmandu Valley. In terms of construction, *Vihara* styles can be distinguished by a *bahil* or a *bahal* (both are Nepali terms)²⁴⁾.

A *bahil* is a two-storied structure built on a raised platform above street level surrounding a sunken square courtyard. Except for the doorway in the front facade, the ground floor is completely isolated from the outside. The facade of the ground floor remains relatively plain. There are two blind windows flanking the entrance which are merely decorative. The entrance to the *bahil* is guarded by two idols, the one to the left of the door usually representing Mahankal, and the one to the right representing Ganesh. The external walls of the *bahil's* upper floor are pierced by windows which appear to have been installed for aesthetic reasons only. The largest opening can be found on the axis of the front facade – it is kind of a wide balcony, not found in other Newar building types. The *bahil* is covered with a wide overhanging roof. The *gajur* crowning the roof indicates the place of the *bahil* shrine. Within the *bahil*, around the inner courtyard, there are open porticos. The main shrine is located opposite the doorway. Usually it contains the image of Buddha Shakyamuni.

²³⁾ Korn (1976:18–21).

²⁴⁾ Korn (1976: 26).

The shrine itself is a small windowless, quadrangular room with a door facing north. Apart from the foyer and the shrine, there are no other spatial divisions on the ground floor. In the corner to the left of the entrance there is a wide stone staircase. In the level of the upper floor, the courtyard is surrounded by a projecting balcony. The open plan hall of the upper floor is not subdivided by walls except in the south wing, where a dark room is built exactly over the shrine²⁵.

The second type of *Vihara* that can be found in the Kathmandu Valley is the *bahal* which is also a two-storied building. It has an inner courtyard similar to the *bahil*, but the spaces of floors are usually divided into rooms overlooking the courtyard. The courtyard is sunken except for a narrow walkway around it. There are three halls opening into the courtyard, one of which is the entrance hall, while the other two are situated in the side wing. The windowless shrine is located opposite the entrance. Each of four narrow staircases situated in the four corners of the courtyard lead to a separate group of three rooms above. The facade of the *bahal* is perfectly symmetric due to the placement of doors and windows and the projecting of the central and corner sections of all facades²⁶.

The infrequent combination of the *bahil* and *bahal* into one single *Vihara* type is a three-storied structure built around a courtyard. The ground and first stories are similar to those of a *bahal*, whereas the second storey resembles the upper storey of a *bahil*²⁷.

The Nepali form of the Hindu priest house is a *math*. It is clearly distinct from the free standing Buddhist monasteries. The design of the *math*, its location, orientation, and its internal planning correspond to that of the standard Newar dwelling house. Larger *maths* generally consist of several smaller house units (*ghars*) centred around the courtyard. Normally the *math* is a three-storied building with a ground floor used as stables, stores or servants' quarters and the upper floors used as grain stores, guest rooms, meeting halls or bedrooms. The facade of the *math* is arranged around the axis defined by the main door in the centre of the ground floor and the large window of the living room in the centre of the third storey. The *math* may only be recognised by its superior woodcarving and elaborate decorations, and it is usually fully integrated into the terrace of houses along the street²⁸.

²⁵ Korn (1976: 28).

²⁶ Korn (1976: 30).

²⁷ Korn (1976: 34).

²⁸ Korn (1976: 40).

PUBLIC REST HOUSES – DHARMASALAS

The last group of the traditional Newar buildings consists of public rest houses called *dharmasalas*. The *dharmasala* is an ubiquitous feature of the countryside and townscapes of the Kathmandu Valley. Though considered somewhat less impressive than the *dega* temples which they outnumber, the traditional free public shelters are equally idiosyncratic of Nepalese architecture. Morphologically, *dharmasalas* and temples are closely related, each representing functionally differentiated aspects of the architecture of the Newars²⁹). The *dharmasalas* can be divided into four types of construction, called *sattal*, *pati*, *mandapa* and *chapat*. All of these occur in various shapes and sizes. Traditionally, a *dharmasala* was always built beside a water source – river, pond, well or fountain. As Korn and Slusser point out, the building not only serves the transient needs of the traveller, but also the “social, religious, and economic needs of the nearby resident community. Indeed, in its function, the *dharmasala* is the concrete expression of the closely-knit, communally-oriented society typical of the Newars”³⁰).

The simplest and most omnipresent type of *dharmasala* is the *pati*. The *pati* is a partially enclosed roofed platform, erected on a rectangular plan (occasionally square, L-shaped or even hexagonal), constructed either as freestanding structure with a double-pitched roof, incorporated into a residential house or attached to an existing building. Frequently the *pati* roofs slope in four directions. The majority of common *patis* have only one solid wall, the rear one of brickwork, returning along each side to act as a brace for the rear wall. The front of *pati* is always an open construction of a posts and lintel³¹). As well as being a shelter for travellers it serves as a meeting place for social or religious gatherings. In Kathmandu, Patan and Bhaktapur, hundreds of *patis* are to be found and at least a dozen can be located in every village of the Kathmandu Valley. They occur widely at the approaches to settlements, and throughout the countryside near roads, paths, cross roads, wells, bridges as well as alongside temples and shrines³²).

The *mandapa* is another type of *dharmasala*. It is a columned pavilion, closely related to the common *pati* in function and construction. The *mandapa* is essentially a roofed platform, but it is always completely un-walled and

²⁹) Slusser (1974: 169–170).

³⁰) Slusser (1974: 171); Korn (1976: 86).

³¹) Slusser (1974: 173).

³²) Korn (1976: 88).

uniformly square or very slightly oblong in its floor plan. The *mandapa* usually has sixteen wooden columns, four on each side and four grouped in a square configuration in the centre. It is most commonly a single-storied structure but is frequently expanded to contain two or three stories (the multi-storied structures built on *mandapa* plans are usually called *sattal*). The roof of the *mandapa* is always hipped. The building is the characteristic town feature. It is located at the road-crossing or in an open square. Frequently the *mandapa* is paired with a twin structure, the two flanking the access stairs to a sunken fountain³³⁾.

Sattal is the name given to a broad variety of multi-storied buildings erected over the basic plan of the *mandapa*, *pati* or possibly other types. According to Korn this seemingly amorphous style can be divided into three groups. The first is the *sattal* of a two-storey *pati* type, the second is the *sattal* of a *mandapa* type (Figure 5), the third is the *sattal* of a house type. The most striking differences between the three types are evident firstly in the ground floor plan which is either square or rectangular, secondly in the lay-out (open halls/ room divisions) and thirdly in the height and number of stories. The *sattal* seems to have been built not only for travellers, but also for longer sojourns for people such as Gurus and Sadhus (in the case of the house type). Since the times of the Licchiavis, each municipality has required a *mandapa* as an assembly hall in order to be classified as a town. *Kashthamandapa* of Kathmandu, *Manimandapa* of Patan and *Dattatreya Dega* of Bahaktapur are the most important *mandapas* for the towns in which they are located, moreover the *Kashthamandapa* is not only the largest one but also the oldest *mandapa* in the whole Valley³⁴⁾.

The original function of a *chapat* – the last type of *dharmasala*, remains unclear. It does not seem to be intended as a rest house, but rather as a community hall. An example of this type is the two-storied *chapat* of *Dupat Tol* in Patan which is 24 metres long and 5.5 metres wide. Its construction indicates that it was intended for gatherings such as a school or meeting place.³⁵⁾

³³⁾ Slusser (1974: 174)

³⁴⁾ Korn (1976: 91–94)

³⁵⁾ Korn (1976: 102)

CONCLUSION

All types of the traditional Newar buildings described in this paper – palaces, temples, monasteries, houses and *dharmasalas*, are to be found in the Kathmandu Valley. Most of them are exceptionally beautiful examples of art particular to the Malla Period. However, a great number of precious objects were lost during the last century, some as a result of earthquakes, weather conditions and ageing, while others as a consequence of the rapid industrialisation of the cities of the Kathmandu Valley. The most endangered of all traditional Newar buildings are the Newar houses. Very often they are rebuilt and their traditional proportions and appearance are changed. Moreover, a lot of forgotten damaged *dharmasalas* can be found in the Kathmandu Valley.

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Fig. 1. *Bhairavnath Mandir* in Bhaktapur (B. Gmińska-Nowak)



Fig. 2. *Golden Temple of Kwa Bahal* in Patan (B. Gmińska-Nowak)



Fig. 3. *Nyatapola Mandir* in Bhaktapur (B. Gmińska-Nowak)



Fig. 4. Royal Palace in Patan (B. Gmińska-Nowak)



Fig. 5. *Chayasilin Mandapa* and the 55-window Palace, *Durbar Square* in Bhaktapur (B. Gmińska-Nowak)