

ROLE OF SOCIAL PRACTICES IN THE DESIGN OF KATHMANU VALLEY TOWNS

Webinar Series on
Ethic, Aesthetic, and Heritage:
The role of tangible and intangible heritage in the Asia-Pacific region

Dr Rajjan Chitrakar

Lecturer in Built Environment
School of Engineering, Design and Construction, Melbourne Polytechnic
rajjanchitrakar@melbournepolytechnic.edu.au

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Presentation outline

The people of the Kathmandu Valley towns

Society and the culture – *intangible urban heritage elements*

Design of urban spaces – social zoning, open space systems and use of urban elements in public spaces – *tangible urban heritage elements*

Conclusion – a relationship between social practices and the design and use of urban spaces

Historical development of traditional towns of Kathmandu Valley

Development of human settlements in the Kathmandu Valley can be traced back to more than two millennia

a major cultural, economic and political centre of the region since its evolution

Kathmandu is a city in the Kathmandu Valley – a capital city of Nepal



Kathmandu Valley towns

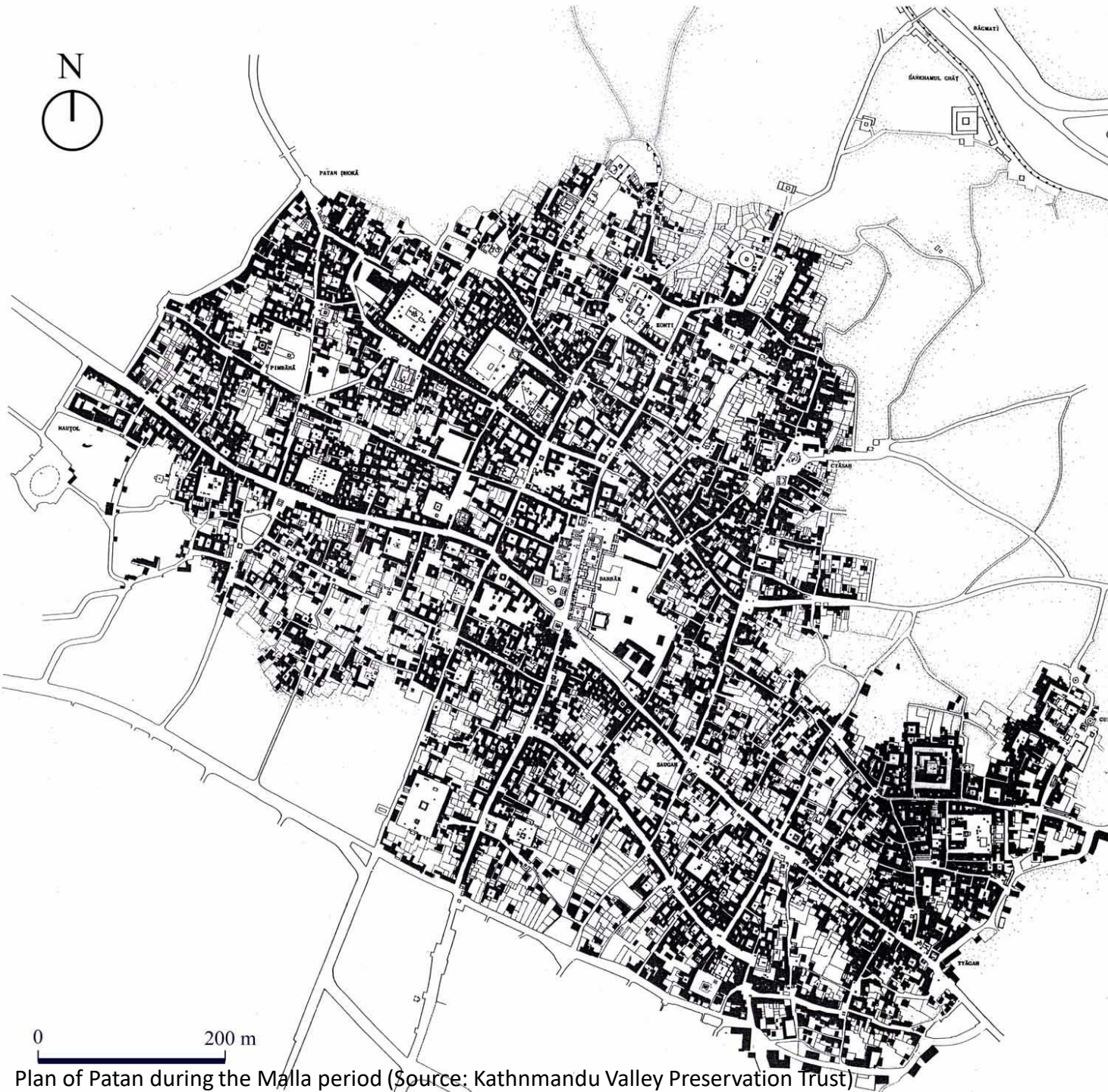
Lichchhavi kings are attributed to have laid the foundation of early settlements (2nd - 9th cent).

Advanced settlements developed with the rise of the **Malla dynasty** in the 13th cent.

During the Malla rule (13th - 18th cent), the smaller Lichchhavi settlements evolved into fully developed towns - grew in size and population and attained an urban character.

Traditional towns as they appear today were built during the Malla period.


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Plan of Patan during the Malla period (Source: Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust)



Newars – the people of the Kathmandu Valley towns

Kathmandu Valley towns have been predominantly inhabited by the indigenous people called the Newars

Highly cultured people who carried the medieval Nepali culture and civilisation to new heights



THE NEWARS
www.imagesofnepal.blogspot.com

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With a language, script and literature of their own, they are “the originators of towns and urban culture” in Nepal

Solely responsible for the valley’s outstanding planning and design of the traditional towns

Newar society and culture

Three elements of intangible urban heritage

- Socio-demographic organisation (heterogenous society and cultural diversity)
- Communal life philosophy
- Occurrence of festivals and religious events

Heterogeneous society and cultural diversity

The Newars represent a highly complex society

Highly influenced by caste-oriented values on which their social organisation is based

The caste system was enforced by **King Jayasthiti Malla** in the 14th cent, who “organised the populace in groups according to the occupation, and also gave each individual a fixed place in society”

Heterogeneous society and cultural diversity

This led to emergence of defined and inflexible social sub-groups within a community, resulting into a heterogeneous society with extremely diverse urban culture – which was good

Such a system of caste and cultural diversity are prevalent in the Newar society even today

Communal life philosophy

The Newar society is communal in nature

The Newars are gregarious people with their deep-rooted beliefs in social values and norms.

Traditionally, they lived in an extended family and demonstrated considerable ease among the neighbours, adopting a communal life philosophy

Social networking and exchange have always been significant parts of their life

Festivals and religious occasions

The social life of the Newar people is much influenced by festivals of one kind or other

the Newars observe more festivals than any other population group in Nepal, to the extent that it is said that there is hardly a day in the year which does not have a festival being celebrated somewhere in the valley

Practically, all festivals have a religious purpose too

During the early Malla period, great festivals of various gods and goddesses were either initiated or made more elaborate

**How did the intangible urban heritage
elements influence the design of urban spaces
in the Kathmandu Valley towns?**

Influences on the design of urban spaces

Spatial distribution of communities - zoning by caste

Hierarchy and distribution of public open spaces

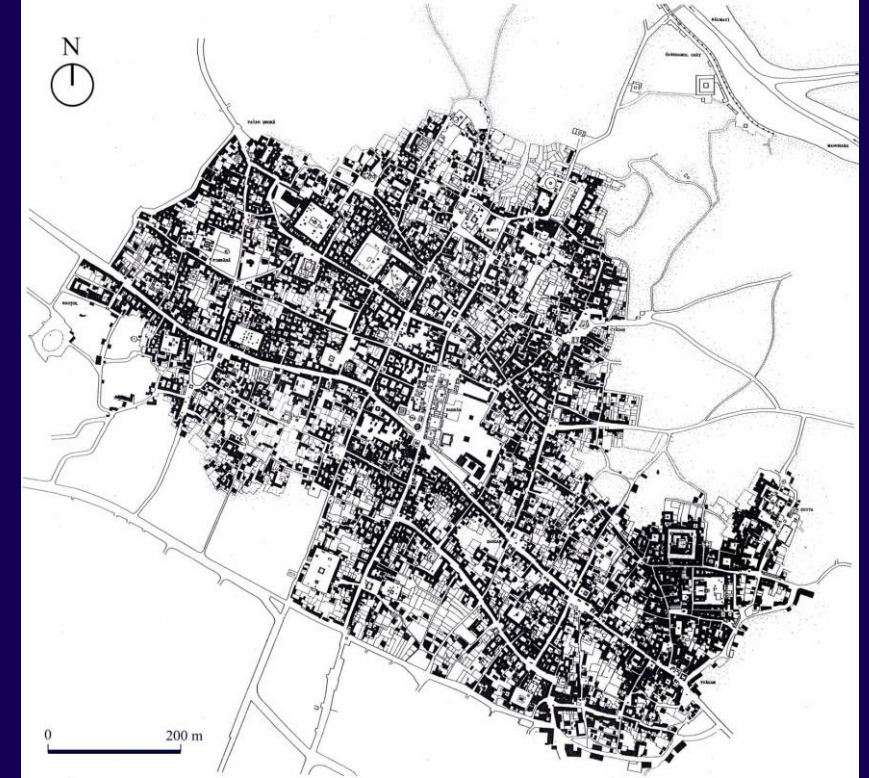
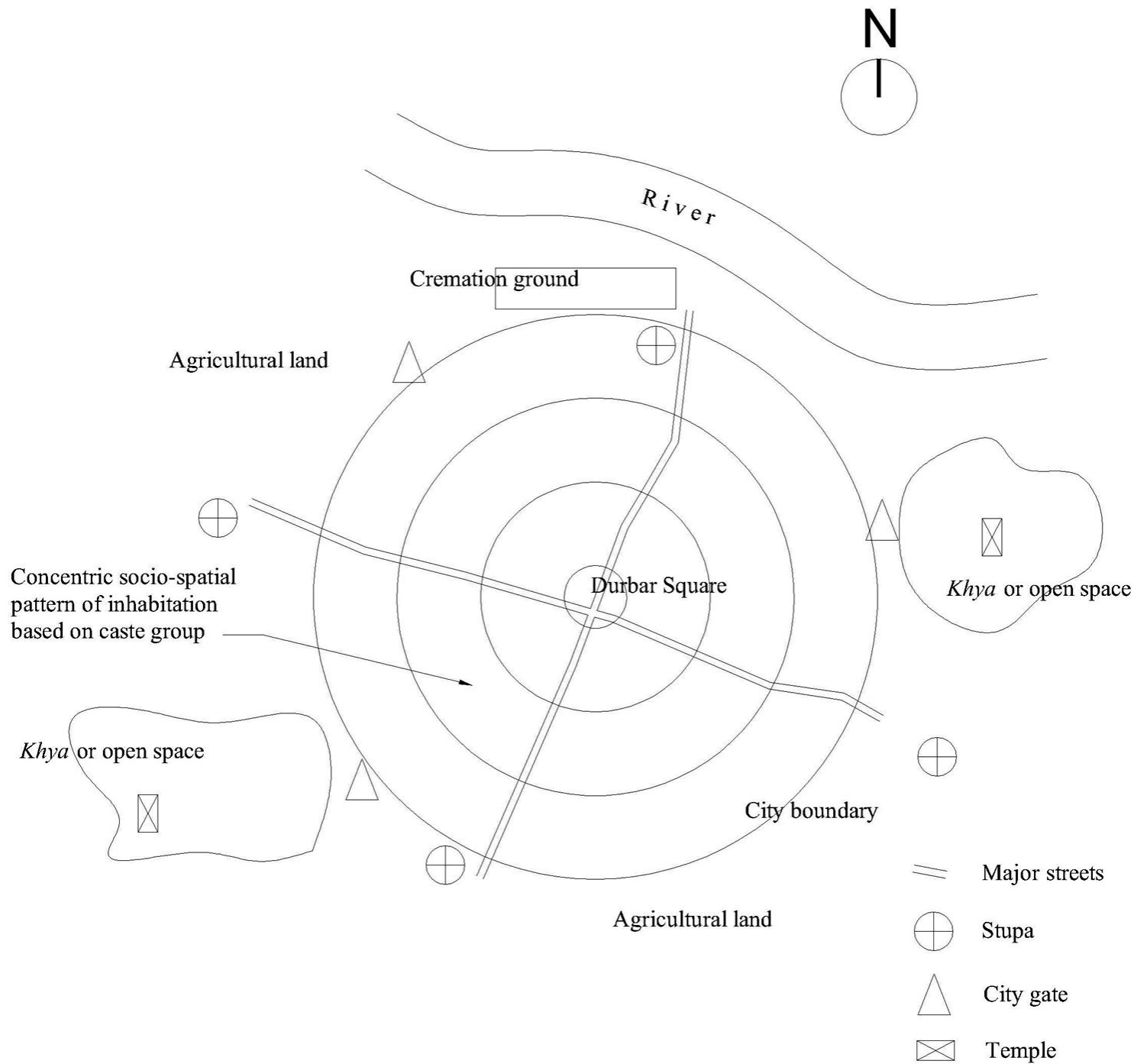
Use of urban elements in public spaces

Distribution of communities

Zoning by caste

Neighbourhoods comprise of a homogenous population, belonging to the same clan group or occupational caste

The distribution of communities based on caste systems has employed a concentric pattern of spatial organisation - higher caste communities are located at the centre, near the royal palace, while the lower ones are located away from the centre at the fringes



The social stratification is evident in the spatial structure of the towns - where a particular community dwells in a particular sector

Distribution of communities

Neighbourhoods is not only physical but also a social unit

The predominance of one caste lends uniform socio-economic characteristics to a neighbourhood

Each neighbourhood bears a name and “people identify themselves with their own neighbourhood rather than with the town as a whole”

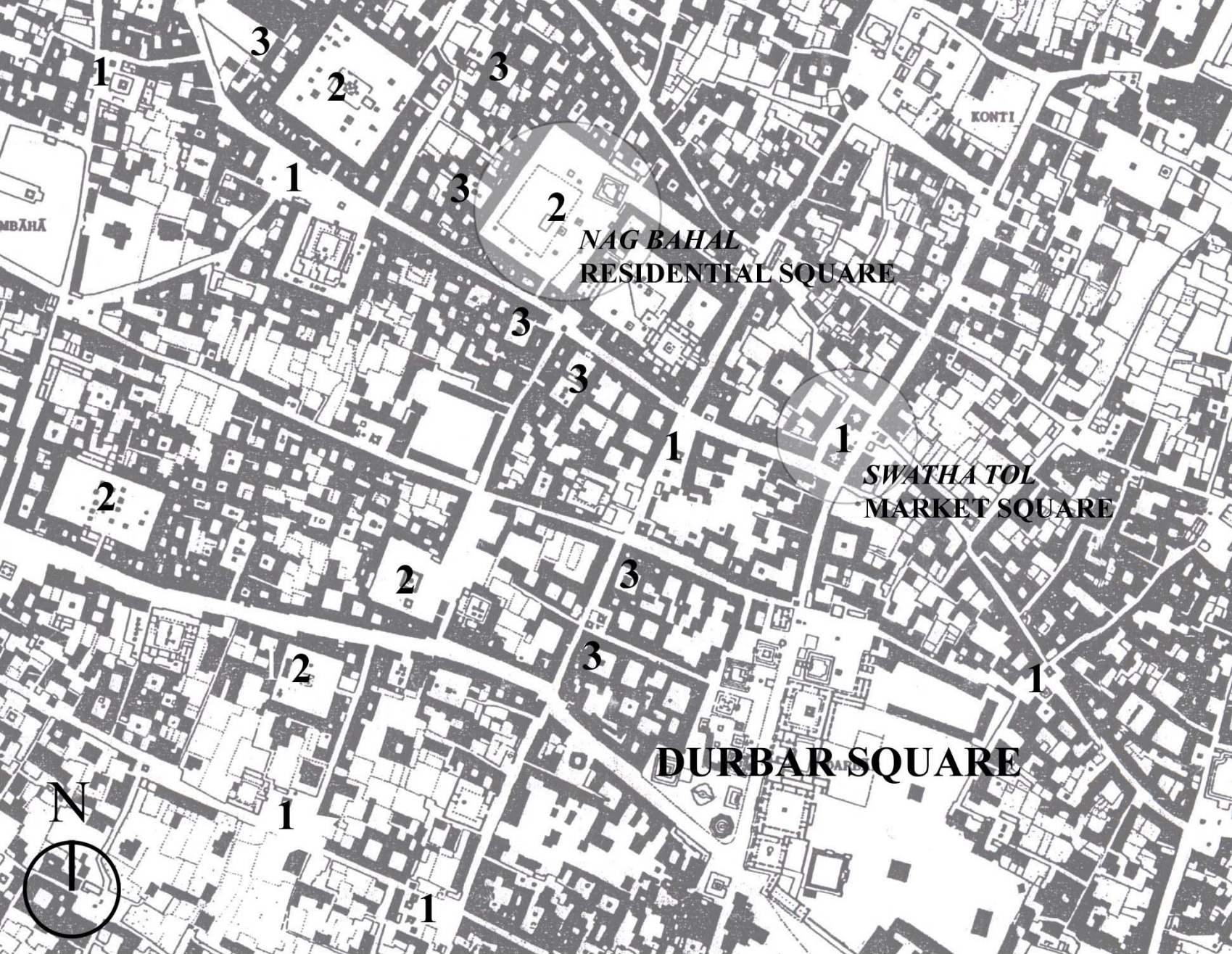
Strong sense of community and identity

Hierarchy and distribution of public open spaces

Urban spaces of the Malla towns have been organised in a very unique and innovative way.

Each neighbourhood is centred around a spacious square

These towns exhibit “a distinct set of urban squares with a clear hierarchy of social and cultural activity”



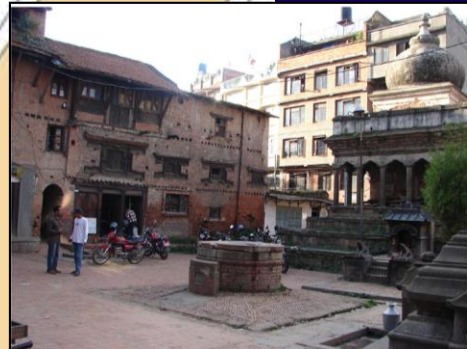
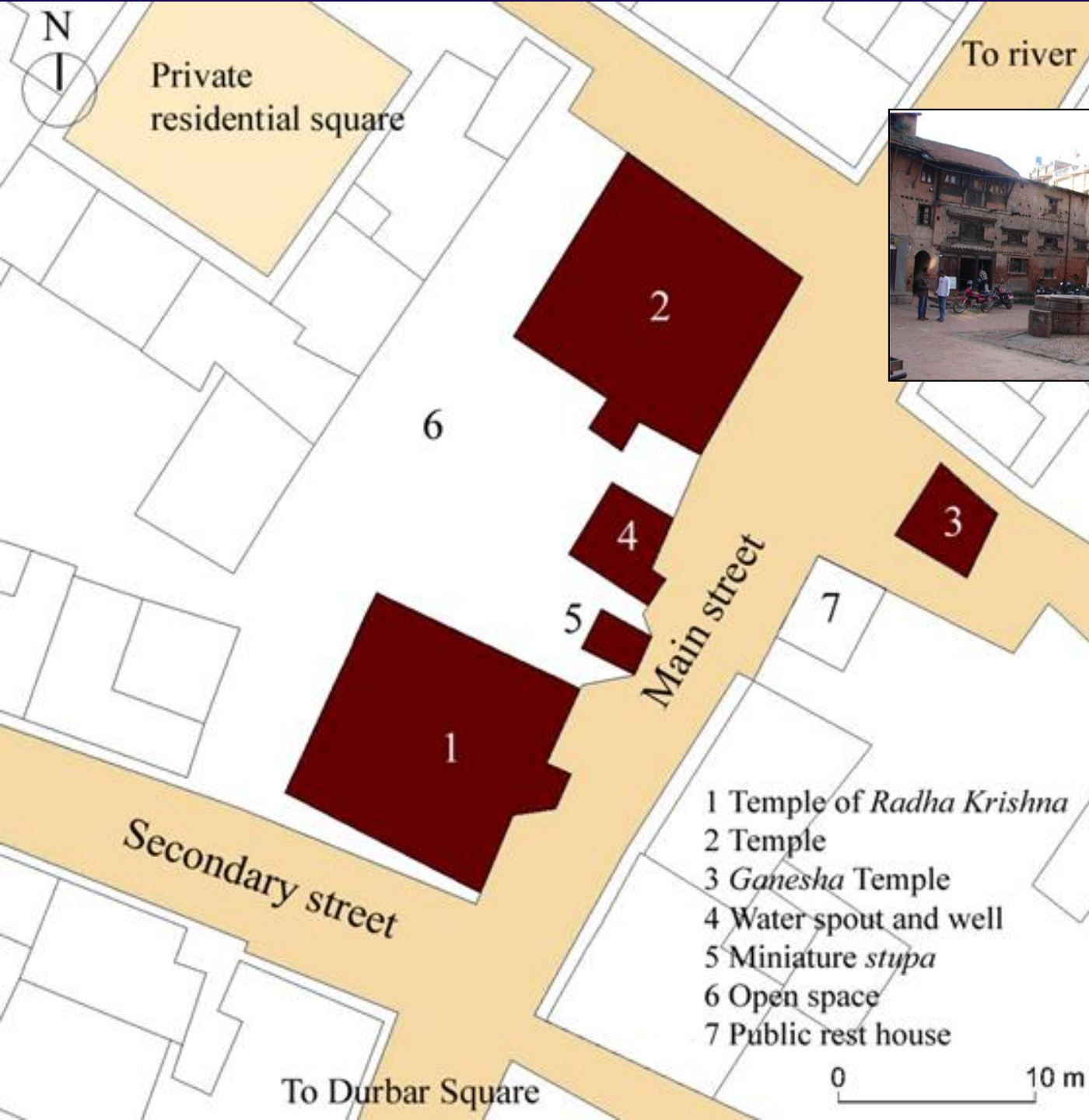
A set of urban squares with a clear hierarchy of social and cultural activity:

- a) the Durbar (palace) square;
- b) the Market square;
- c) the Residential Neighbourhood square; and
- d) the Private Residential square

Use of urban elements in public spaces

Neighbourhood open spaces consist of many elements of social interest to facilitate public life and activities

In each neighbourhood, a number of temples or shrines, traditional public facilities such as a pati (public rest house), wells, fountains and community houses are present



These elements respond to the needs of the people – supports both the daily life and the festivals and religious occasions

Element type	Purpose and description	
Temple	A temple is the most important and essential element of a neighborhood public space. The temples are either square or rectangular (often octagonal) in shape with symmetrical plan and elevation. A neighborhood square may have more temples, in addition to the one housing the deity of Ganesh.	
Pati – a public rest house	A pati or public rest house serves as a place for respite and a place for travellers to stay overnight. These also serve as a place for leisure in which to spend daily life, a place for exchanging goods and a place for playing traditional music. In most cases, these do not appear in isolation but are always physically embedded within the built mass.	
Well	Wells are extensively present as a source of water for the residents and define a public domain in space.	
Hiti (Stone waterspout)	These are sunken platforms with stone spouts discharging the water. These elements create space within themselves with the confining walls and are usually accompanied by the public rest houses.	
Stupa and Chaitya	These are important Buddhist shrines and may work as space radiating volumes. The chaityas are usually moderate in size while the stupas are larger volumes.	
Dabali – an open elevated platform	A Dabali is simply an elevated platform built for a simple reason of gaining height. They serve as a stage for performance and for display of goods. The dabalis regulate the horizontal flow of space and guide a movement of the users.	



In neighbourhood squares, children play and grow up together; women wash their utensils and laundry nearby a source of water



Adults or elderly people are found having a chat with their fellow neighbours, sitting on a plinth of a nearby pati

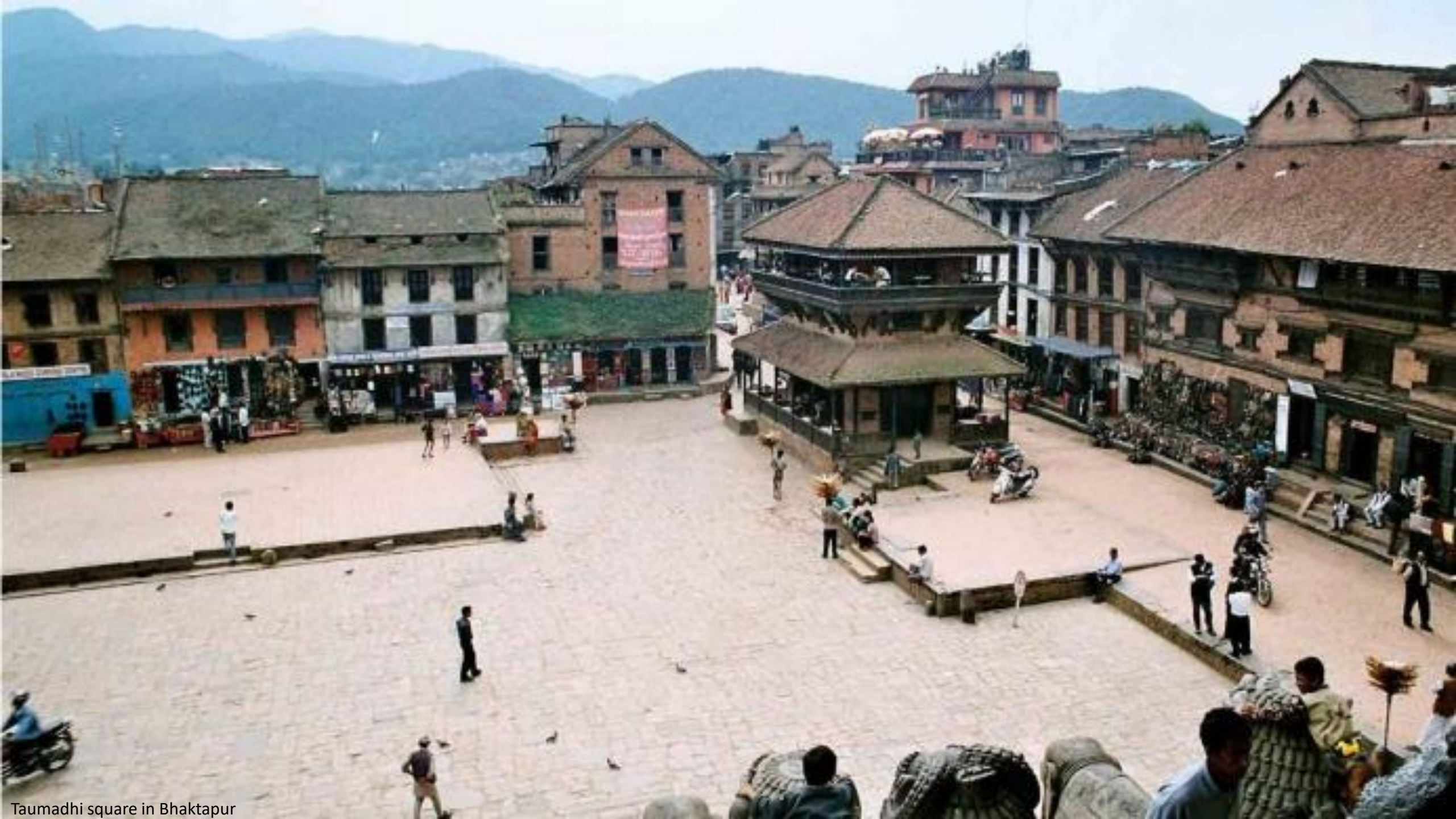
People know each other personally and mutual observation and gossip are important sanctions

Use of urban elements in public spaces

With a prolonged tradition, “the festivals remain forceful events even today” and are celebrated in many forms.

Most of them are always centred around the important monuments in public realms

Some festivals require a large open space for the display and worship of an idol or god by the crowd, while others use the streets with gods moving in the chariots along the streets and squares of the neighbourhoods



Taumadhi square in Bhaktapur



Market square
are transformed
into a vibrant
urban space
during major
festivals

Conclusion

Design of urban spaces in the Kathmandu Valley towns exhibits a distinct pattern of settlement that is unique even in South Asia

These towns have evolved as a constructive conglomeration of the tangible and intangible urban heritage elements

Great role of social practices in shaping the public spaces

Both tangible and intangible urban heritage elements need to be preserved for future generations

My publications

PhD thesis

Transformation of public space in contemporary urban neighbourhoods of Kathmandu Valley, Nepal: An investigation of changing provision, use and meaning

<https://eprints.qut.edu.au/88934/>

Google Scholar

<https://scholar.google.com.au/citations?user=1Di6e-IAAAAJ&hl=en>

Researchgate

https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Rajjan_Chitrakar

Thank you

Questions!