Assessment of Optional and Social Activities in an Open Exhibition Space: A Case of Basantapur Dabali

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Abstract

This research investigates the socio-spatial dynamics, the reciprocal relationship between physical space and social behavior of Kathmandu Durbar Square, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, through the lens of liminality, a term derived from the Latin word limen, which translates to ”threshold”. Focusing on Basantapur Dabali, situated at the eastern entrance of the Kathmandu Durbar Square, the study examines how traditional urban public platforms function as ’threshold spaces’ (often referred to as ”liminal zones” which are transitional areas that mediate between two distinct conditions, typically moving from the public street to a private building, or from a secular area to a sacred one) that facilitate both scripted rituals like the daily morning Puja (offerings), the ceremonial processions of the Living Goddess Kumari, the seasonal construction of the Lingo (ceremonial pole) during Indra Jatra and spontaneous social interactions. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, combining behavior mapping, user surveys, and morphological analysis the research identifies a spectrum of activities ranging from necessary religious rites to ’optional’ social engagements, a foundational concept in urban design, developed specifically by the Danish architect and urban designer Jan Gehl. By analyzing these activities within a framework of urban transition, the study moves beyond generic public space discourse to highlight how liminality sustains cultural continuity and social cohesion in a dense, modernizing heritage context. The findings suggest that the vibrancy of the Dabali is not merely a product of its historical significance, but of its capacity to act as a meaningful ‘urban common’ that bridges the sacred and the secular, providing a model for socially responsive public architecture in growing cities.

Keywords: Public plaza, optional and social activities, urban lifestyle, multifunctional space, liminal urbanism, socio-spatial dynamics, liminality, urban common, threshold spaces.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

An Urban Plaza is a vital multifunctional space that serves as the ”living room” of a city [1] . Beyond its physical boundaries, it is an urban common, a shared stage necessary for fostering urban lifestyles and communal interaction [2]. It is a multifunctional space where the physical environment such as paving, seating, and enclosure directly shapes the socio-spatial dynamics of the city [3]. The functionality of a plaza is rooted in a dynamic spectrum of human behavior. According to Jan Gehl (1971; 2010), these range from necessary activities (mandatory tasks) to optional and social activities, which only flourish in high-quality environments. This behavioral shift is inherently dynamic; as a space transitions from a site of transit to one of leisure, it enters a state of liminality .

Defined as being ”betwixt and between” [4], liminality acts as the bridge between these different social states. It prevents the plaza from becoming a ”single-use” monument by fostering a fluid identity across three dimensions as Spatial liminality [5], temporal liminality [6] and behavorial liminality [7], [8].Crucially, this fluid identity is operationalized through responsive liminality, which is the capacity of this ”in-between” urban space to adapt its physical layout to support these shifting human behaviors, cultural rituals, and community needs over time. Ultimately, this adaptive flexibility is the primary driver of urban vibrancy. By resisting fixed definitions and responding to the fluid rhythms of daily life, the plaza facilitates the spontaneous exchange and cultural continuity necessary for a living urban common [2]. Ultimately, this mechanism serves as the primary driver of urban vibrancy, sustaining the ongoing level of human activity, social interaction, and economic vitality that allows the city’s physical form to successfully draw people together.

Figure 1. Map of Kathmandu Valley

In Nepal’s Kathmandu Valley, traditional urban plazas, most prominently represented by the historic Durbar Squares serve as a primary case study to examine the enduring vibrancy

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of traditional urban plazas. These plaza acts as a liminal space, seamlessly blending physical, temporal, and behavioral dimensions to foster active social engagement and resist becoming a static heritage site. Kathmandu Durbar Square (Hanuman Dhoka) stands as a prime example of this enduring urban vibrancy. It operates simultaneously as a sacred sanctuary, a commercial marketplace, and a communal living room.

1.2 Study Area: Basantapur Dabali

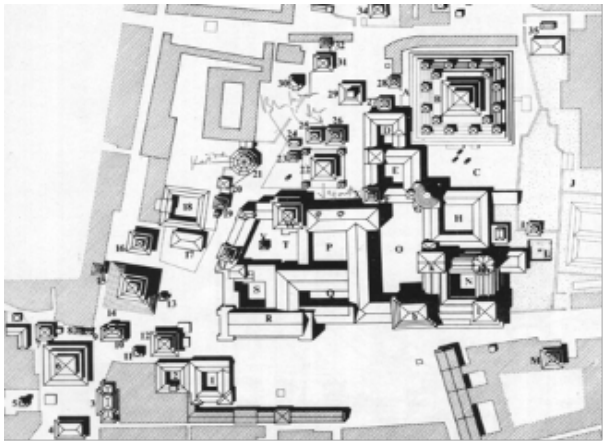

Figure 2. Basantapur Durbar Square with Highlighted Study Area: Basantapur Dabali Source: Adapted From [9]

Basantapur Dabali, situated within the UNESCO World Heritage site of Kathmandu Durbar Square, remains a primary node where tradition and informal urban life converge. This specific zone is the most active ”social heart” of the Kathmandu Durbar Square, where the physical structure of the city most clearly creates a stage for public life. Adjacent to the Kumari Ghar (the residence of the Royal Kumari), the area functions as a living exhibition space.

1.3 Problem Statement

Current heritage management in the Kathmandu Valley prioritizes architectural preservation over the intangible social activities driving urban vitality [6], [10]. Consequently, a research gap exists regarding how environmentally driven optional and social activities shape the liminal character of Basantapur Dabali. By ignoring these transitional moments, current planning frameworks fail to comprehend how the plaza actually operates. Without empirical research to bridge the gap between rigid conservation and lived experience, traditional public plazas risk losing their responsive social dynamics, turning vibrant urban commons into exclusionary monuments.

1.4 Importance of Study

TSquare as a ”living laboratory” where traditional urban forms adapt to modern public life, shifting heritage management from static preservation toward a socially responsive urbanism that safeguards the urban commons. Grounded in three primary pillars, the research demonstrates how the plaza builds community resilience by acting as a democratic space for social interaction [11]. It validates the square’s role in providing psychological and physical relief from Kathmandu’s dense urban sprawl [12], while anchoring civic identity in a globalized world through enhanced imageability [13]. Ultimately, this study bridges the gap between historical conservation and contemporary civic needs, offering a framework to maintain historic public realms as vibrant, inclusive, and functional spaces.

1.5 Research Objectives

1) Main Objectives

- To examine the socio-spatial dynamics of public plazas.

2) Specific Objectives

- Spatial Mapping: Identifying how the physical layout functions as a liminal threshold between the modern city and the heritage core.
- Behavioral Analysis: Categorizing optional and social activities to compare how formal exhibitions versus spontaneous gatherings alter spatial use.
- Social Impact: Evaluating the cultural and spatial factors that foster belonging and sustain long-term urban vibrancy

2. Literature Review

2.1 Urban Plaza

Public space is a complex construct shaped by design, accessibility, and social context, serving as a vital stage for civic engagement and inclusive interaction [2]. Within this realm, urban plazas function as ”third places”, an informal gathering spot that facilitate social life beyond the home and workplace [14]. An urban plaza is a planned open space, typically found at the heart of a city’s social and commercial fabric. Defined primarily by its hardscape like paving, masonry, and architectural structures, it functions as a ”node” within the urban environment [13]. Unlike a traditional park, a plaza is designed to facilitate high-density human interaction, serving as a flexible stage for everything from quiet contemplation to massive civic demonstrations.

1) Urban Vibrancy and Key Plaza Elements

Urban vibrancy is the continuous level of human activity, social interaction, and economic vitality that transforms passive architectural forms into self-sustaining public realms [11]. It measures how effectively a space draws diverse people together to commute, linger, and interact. To systematically generate this vitality, the key drivers of a public square are categorized into three core dimensions:

(i) Physical and Structural Elements: These ”hard” components anchor pedestrian flows. Structural building enclosure shields gathering zones from chaotic surrounding roads, while floor paving signals stationary zones. Level changes and plinths offer natural vantage points and open sightlines, creating clear thresholds between rapid transit and slow-paced public life [12].

(ii) Amenity and Comfort Elements: These features convert transit corridors into high-density social hubs by extending stay durations. Sittable infrastructure—like wide ledges and monument bases—serves as the primary catalyst for optional activities [3]. Similarly, water features provide acoustic masking against traffic, while landscaping offers crucial microclimate control.

(iii) Social and Perceptual Elements: These intangible drivers turn physical spaces into active urban commons. Triangulation points like performances trigger spontaneous interactions between strangers. This is reinforced by permeability (active edges) that links indoor activity directly to the plaza, and strategic lighting that extends the square's temporal and economic lifecycle past sunset.

2) Activities in Urban Plazas and its nature

An urban plaza's vitality spans ritualistic to mundane activities, as categorized by Gehl [11] into necessary, optional, and social tiers. Unlike mandatory tasks, optional and social behaviors like dining, performances, and socializing, depend entirely on how inviting a public space is. Within dense heritage settings, these activities are stimulated by a mix of accessibility, layout, and cultural programming. Physical elements like informal seating, clear landmark views, and bustling informal economies directly convert static historical sites into active, dynamic "third places" [14].

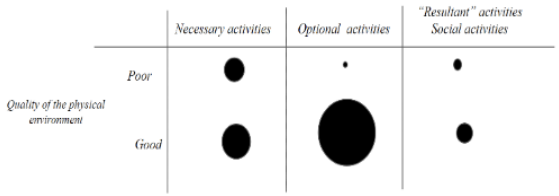

Figure 3. Graphic Representation of the Relationship Between the Quality of Outdoor Spaces and the Rate of Occurrence of Outdoor Activities Adapted From [11], [15]

- Necessary Activities ("Must-Dos"): These mandatory, functional tasks occur regardless of spatial quality. Examples include commuting, running errands, or attending vital rituals. Architecturally, they are "design-proof" because individuals endure poorly designed, uninviting spaces if it is their only viable route.

- Optional Activities ("Want-Dos"): These optional leisure actions occur only when the physical environment, weather, and seating are inviting. Examples include sunbathing on temple plinths or viewing art exhibitions. They serve as the true test of a plaza, multiplying when edges and thresholds are comfortable.

- Social Activities ("The Result"): This "life between buildings" consists of spontaneous interactions that erupt when people linger for optional reasons. Examples include children playing or strangers conversing. While impossible to design directly, they are catalyzed by creating protective spatial niches and comfortable edges.

The life of an urban plaza is driven by a constant, invisible interaction between the physical environment and human behavior. When an urban plaza is populated, a highly dynamic nature comes into play. It ceases to be a static architectural footprint and instead becomes a flexible civic stage where social hierarchies temporarily dissolve into a state of shared community [4]. This dynamic performance relies on Jan Gehl's activity spectrum [11], while necessary routines (commuting) occur regardless of spatial quality, optional and social behaviors (lingering, conversing) only flourish when the environment is inviting. This constant behavioral shift is further stimulated by triangulation points [3], such as street performances or informal markets, which act as social catalysts that prompt strangers to interact. This inherent activity-driven dynamism is precisely what opens up the room for liminality to manifest.

Passive Architecture + Human Activity and Flows
↓
Dynamic Socio-Spatial Life
↓
Activation of LIMINAL SPACE
↓
Spatial, Temporal, and Behavioral Thresholds

3) Liminality

Originally developed in ethnography by Arnold van Gennep [16] and later expanded by Victor Turner [4], the concept of liminality describes a "threshold" state—a period of transition during which participants exist "betwixt and between" their customary social roles. In urban morphology, liminality refers to physical and psychological buffer spaces that exist between clearly defined functional zones, such as the transition from private domesticity to public civic life [17]. This state of transition acts as the primary catalyst for optional activities. It allows individuals to step out of the rigid social and professional structures of daily life, entering a neutral enclosure where they can transition between different modes of urban existence (e.g., from worker to citizen, or from isolated individual to collective participant) at their own pace.

This state of transition acts as the primary catalyst for optional activities. It allows individuals to step out of the rigid social and professional structures of daily life, entering a neutral enclosure where they can transition between different modes of urban existence (e.g., from worker to citizen, or from isolated individual to collective participant) at their own pace.

4) Physical Elements of Liminality in an Urban Plaza

An urban plaza functions as a "spatial hallway" where rigid social hierarchies temporarily dissolve into a state of communitas. As an unprogrammed void between private interiors and public roads, it acts as a psychological buffer facilitating transitions between different modes of urban existence. In

architectural and urban theory, liminality is directly built into the physical environment. Elements like thresholds, edges, niches, and enclosures serve as the structural ”hardware” that facilitates these fluid, transitional experiences:

- The Threshold (The Gateway)
- The Edge (The Boundary)
- The Niche (The Pocket)
- The Enclosure (The Container)

2.2 Basantapur Dabali: local context

Figure 4. Basantapur Dabali Area with Vendors

The Basantapur Dabali is the historic and social centerpiece of Kathmandu’s Durbar Square, a UNESCO World Heritage site. It is a quintessential example of Newar urban design, where monumental architecture, religious devotion, and everyday civic life intersect. In the context of Basantapur, the Dabali acts as the primary ”node” [13] that anchors the social and commercial fabric of the Durbar Square.

The enduring success of the Basantapur Dabali as a contemporary urban plaza stem from its inherent socio-spatial flexibility, which allows it to function as a high-performance urban common that transcends its historical origins. Operating as a vibrant ”third place,” the Dabali effectively bridges the intricate network of dense residential Bahals with the city’s monumental heritage core [14]. Its physical elevation provides an instinctive prospect-and-refuge vantage point for people-watching, transforming the stone plinth into highly successful sittable infrastructure. By providing multi-layered thresholds where stone paving meets temple steps, the platform facilitates a seamless behavioral transition from necessary daily transit to optional social leisure and ritual performance. Ultimately, by hosting both informal modern commerce and sacred tradition, the Dabali remains a vital, self-sustaining public realm. The buildings marked with numbers like 1, 12, 13, 14 and 17(shown in figure no. 2) provide the ”enclosure” that gives this plaza its character:

- Kumari Ghar (1/Adjacent): To the south of the red box lies the residence of the Living Goddess. The flow of people waiting to glimpse the Kumari creates a constant socio-spatial dynamic of ”waiting and watching” within your study area.

Figure 5. Kumari Ghar

- Trailokya Mohan Narayan Temple (12): Located on the western edge of the red zone, this temple is dedicated to Vishnu. Its plinth often serves as a natural boundary for the Dabali’s activities.

Figure 6. Trailokya Mohan Narayan Temple

- Maju Dega (13) (The ”Hippie Temple”): Characterized by its massive nine-stepped plinth, the triple-roofed Maju Dega temple serves as the ultimate ”urban grandstand” in Newar Urbanism, providing an elevated spatial infrastructure that turns people-watching into a public performance anchoring the plaza’s western boundary.

Figure 7. Maju Dega

Table 1. Summary of Elements of Urban Plaza and Its Functions

Liminal Element	Physical Feature	Design	Socio-Spatial Function	Urban Vibrancy Impact
1	Threshold	Paving changes, entrance steps	Regulates urban speed	Softens transitions between busy and quiet zones
2	Edge	Monument plinths, low walls	Provides suitable boundaries	Multiplies optional activities (lingering, resting).
3	Niche	Recessed facades, Pati porches	Offers protective shelter	Supports intimate social interactions and relief.
4	Enclosure	Height-to-width building ratios	Creates the ”urban room”	Fosters psychological comfort and civic identity.

- Shiva-Parvati Temple (17) (Navayogini): Defining the northern boundary, the Shiva-Parvati Temple features a unique rectangular base and iconic upper-window deities that overlook a broad lower plinth, creating an accessible social ”porch” where sacred sanctuary meets every day urban life.

Figure 8. Shiva-Parvati Temple

1) Necessary Activities in Basantapur Dabali

Within the heritage core of Basantapur, necessary activities manifest as high-velocity, goal-oriented, and ”design-proof” routines that maintain the daily circulatory system of the city. These mandatory behaviors occur independently of spatial comfort, weather conditions, or architectural quality, primarily occupying the open stone floor and main arterial pathways:

- Arterial Commuting: Residents and laborers from nearby gallis (Maru, Makhan, Kilagal) use the plaza as a thoroughfare to New Road and Indra Chowk.
- Commercial Transit: Vendors and delivery personnel treat the open plaza strictly as a functional logistics corridor to transport goods.
- Ritual Maintenance: Devotees navigate directly between the Kumari Ghar and temples for mandatory morning puja.
- Tourism Transit: Visitors walk linearly through the central axis to reach palace gateways or ticketing checkpoints.

2.3 Theoretical Framework: Hypothesizing Responsive Liminality in Historic Plazas

The current literature suggests that the physical and symbolic liminality of a traditional plaza, particularly its role as a structural and temporal threshold, serves as a primary driver of optional social activities. This premise is largely grounded in Gehl’s theory of “life between buildings” [8], [18], which posits that the micro-qualities of the physical environment directly influence the frequency and duration of non-mandatory public activities. TThis theoretical stance aligns with Whyte’s observations on “triangulation” [3], wherein specific architectural features or localized events act as spatial catalysts that promote spontaneous interactions among strangers. By synthesizing Western theoretical frameworks with indigenous Eastern urban morphology, urban theory suggests that a plaza’s capacity to transition seamlessly between a sacred ritual stage and a secular exhibition space, described as “spatial responsiveness,” ultimately sustains contemporary urban vibrancy rather than historical monumentality alone [1].

To examine this socio-spatial mechanism, the literature structures this hypothesis as a tripartite system of intersecting layers that collectively activate public space:

- Physical Environment (Layer 1): Gehl’s environmental pre-conditions (sittable ledges, microclimate) provide the baseline infrastructure necessary for optional behaviors.
- Social Catalyst (Layer 2): Whyte’s triangulation uses fixed monuments and temporal events as spatial catalysts to trigger public interaction.
- Spatial Responsiveness (Layer 3): Carr’s liminality positions this plaza as a dual threshold bridging morphological boundaries (sacred/secular) and temporal shifts (commerce/festival).
- Theoretical Intersection: The convergence of these layers proves that responsive, adaptive physical and cultural catalysts sustain public life far better than static monuments.

Behavior mapping is a structured observational method in urban design that tracks the spatial and temporal distribution of human activities. It serves as the operational bridge between theory and fieldwork, empirically recording how physical, temporal, and behavioral thresholds materialize within public spaces.

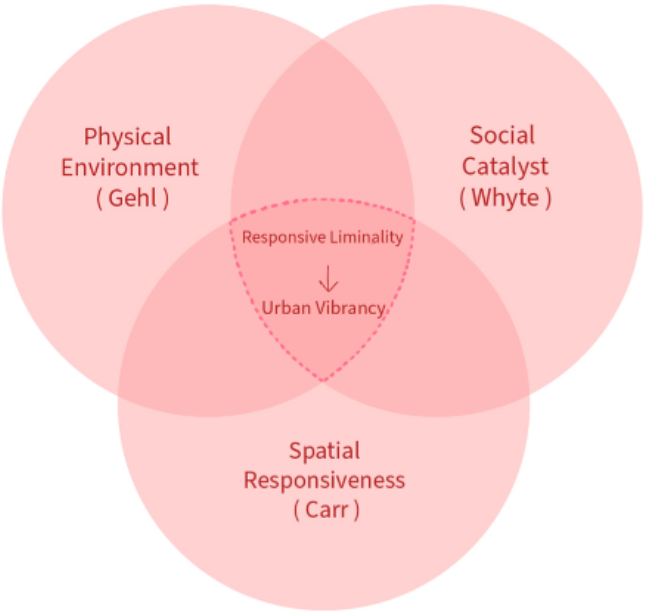

Figure 9. The Tripartite Socio-spatial Model Illustrating How the Convergence of Physical Infrastructure (Gehl), Social Triangulation (Whyte), and Spatial Responsiveness (Carr) Activates Responsive Liminality to Generate Urban Vibrancy.

3. Methodology

The research utilizes a mixed-methods approach, combining site observations, behavioral mapping, and qualitative surveys to evaluate the socio-spatial performance of Basantapur Dabali.

3.1 Behavioral Mapping

To test the hypothesis, behavioral mapping recorded user actions, exact locations, and stay durations [3]:

- Base Map: A scaled architectural plan of the Dabali, temple plinths, and the Kumari Ghar interface served as the recording substrate.
- Observation Intervals: Mapping was conducted in 20-minute snapshots across three distinct periods: Morning (Ritual/Commute), Afternoon (Market/Tourist peak), and Evening (Social gathering).
- Data Coding: Stationary dots marked optional activities (sitting, standing to talk), movement lines traced necessary activities (commuting), and overlapping activity clusters highlighted architectural "liminal hotspots."

3.2 Survey Instruments and Sampling

Structured surveys with 50 stratified participants captured the qualitative motivations behind spatial usage:

- Locals and Devotees (30%): Assessed daily ritual usage and cultural continuity.

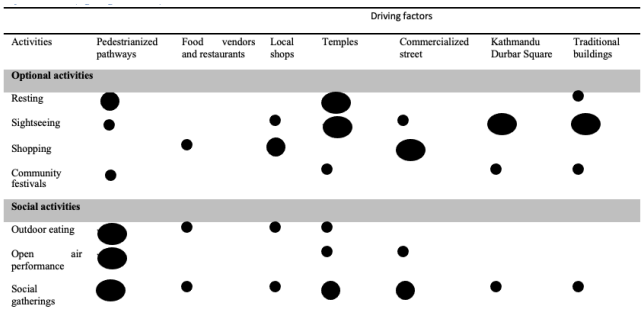

Figure 10. The Check-marks Denote the Presence and Intensity of Specific Behaviors Observed During Mapping Sessions, Categorized by the 'Liminal' Quality of the Location (e.g., Edge vs. Center).

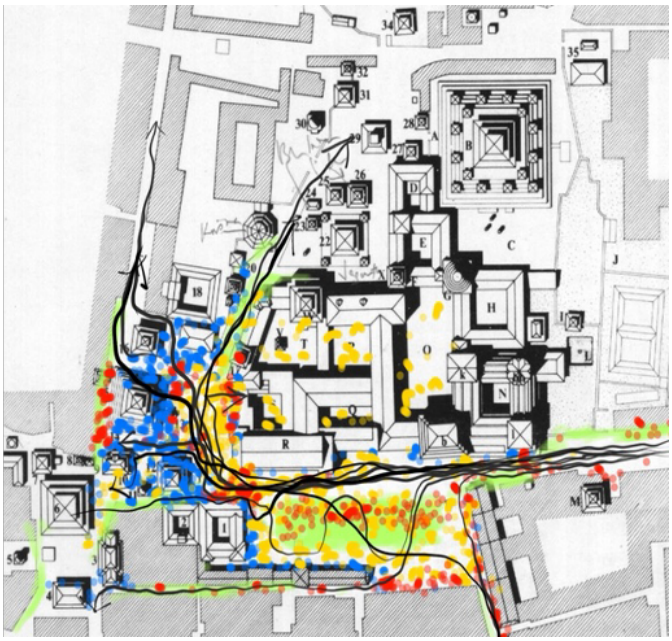

Figure 11. Behaviour Mapping of Basantapur Dabali Square

- Vendors and Informal Workers (40%): Evaluated the economic-social interface.
- Tourists (30%): Analyzed exhibition and sightseeing impacts.

Data Correlation: Survey motivations (e.g., seeking shade, people-watching) were cross-referenced with mapped locations to validate physical behavioral patterns.

4. Result and Discussion

4.1 Mapping the Behavioral Spectrum

To empirically test the tripartite hypothesis, behavior mapping was conducted through systematic observation at regular intervals, spatializing Gehl's activity categories onto the micro-morphology of the Basantapur Dabali [11]. The observed behaviors were neither uniform nor random; rather, they formed a clear hierarchy of engagement concentrated at key architectural thresholds.

Symbol	Activity Type	Gehl's Category	Spatial/Morphological Trigger
→	Pedestrian Transit	Necessary	High-velocity movement through open stone floor and eastern arterial entries .
	Sitting / Resting	Optional	Structural shade and physical steps of temple plinths.
	Standing / Watching	Optional	Elevated vantage points of the Dabali platform during exhibitions.
	Informal Vending	Socio-Economic	Boundary zones between the open square and temple stairs.
	Social Interaction	Social	Spontaneous group dialogue catalyzed by vendors or shared views.

Figure 12. Behavior Mapping Index as Per Gehl's Category

4.2 Empirical Testing of the Tripartite Hypothesis

1) Layer 1: Physical Environment and the "Edge Effect" (Testing Gehl's Pre-conditions)

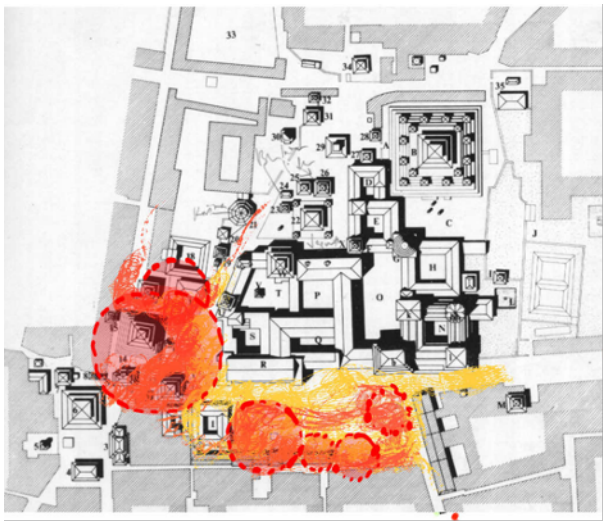

Figure 13. Transition Zone: High-velocity Transit Converts to Stationary Pause Due to Architectural Shading and Seating Availability.

Field observations validate that the physical morphology of the Newar urban fabric functions as the primary baseline infrastructure for public life. Rather than operating as flat, unprogrammed surfaces, the edges of the Basantapur plaza are highly articulated architectural interfaces characterized by distinct Edge and Niche effects.

(i) The "Edge Effect" and the Plinth as Threshold (The Limen)

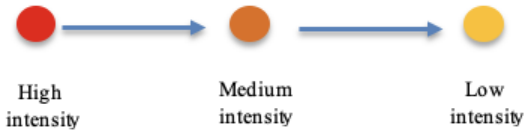

Figure 14. Intensity of Stationary Pause Observed

Behavioral mapping shows that 90%of optional activities (sitting, leaning, and people-watching) are tightly concentrated within a 3-meter radius of the temple plinths (Maju Deval and Narayan temples) and traditional phalchas (public rest houses).

Figure 15. Diagrammatic Analysis of Liminal Layers: The Temple Plinths as Filters for Urban Movement. (Referenced in the Paragraph Above)

- The Transit Void vs. Social Filter: While the geometric center of the Dabali operates as a high-velocity "transit void" for necessary activities, the architectural edges act as active social filters.

- The Plinth as Seating Infrastructure: Users actively avoid sitting in the open sun, seeking out the "architectural shadow" of the monuments. The tiered steps of the temples form the ultimate physical limen—belonging neither to the sacred interior nor to the secular dust of the street. By occupying these steps, a user adopts a posture of semi-participation, remaining in a state of repose while observing the surrounding public life.

(ii) The "Niche Effect" and the Antique Interface

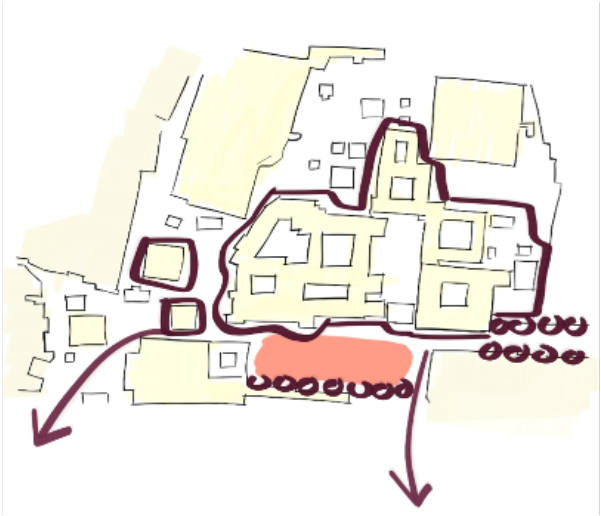

Figure 16. Behavioral 'Hotspots' Illustrating the Transition from Necessary Transit to Optional Social Pause

While the open plinths accommodate exposed, outward-

facing observation, the surrounding residential facades (Chhen) provide highly localized architectural pockets that trigger a distinct Niche Effect,

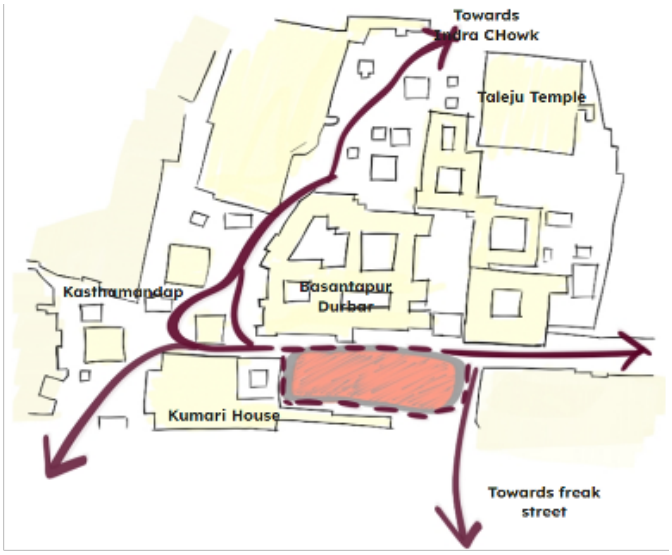

Figure 17. Mapping of Visual and Physical Connectivity Between Informal Commercial Nodes and the Dabali Threshold.

- Micro-Environments for Withdrawal: The recessed shop portals, projecting wooden bay windows (Sanjhya), and deep, shaded colonnades of historic structures act as physical niches. These pockets provide microclimatic shelter from both the sun and the high-velocity pedestrian streams.

- Suspension of Status: Behavioral data shows that these niches are heavily utilized for long-duration stationary pauses, particularly by local elders and residents. The structural enclosure of the niche allows a user to step entirely out of the active urban current, creating a protective ”in-between” zone where normal social status is suspended and privacy is achieved within a highly public realm.

Empirical Validation

These findings prove that historical structures do not function merely as static heritage objects; they operate as active socio-spatial infrastructure. The architectural invitation of the plinths (edges) and the colonnades (niches) successfully slow down pedestrian velocity, providing the essential morphological pre-conditions required for optional behaviors to manifest.

2) Layer 2: Social Catalysts and the ”Vendor-Anchor” (Testing Whyte’s Triangulation)

The data demonstrates a direct spatial correlation between the location of informal street economies and the duration of a pedestrian’s stay.

- Socio-Economic Triangulation: Informal street vendors and local artisans stationed at the base of temple stairs act as physical ”bridges.” Their presence prompts immediate, spontaneous interaction between diverse user groups, including international tourists and local residents
- Breaking the Flow: As illustrated in the movement mapping profiles, the presence of these vendors causes a dramatic behavioral shift: high-velocity transit trajectories (”Grey Arrows”) instantly break apart into clustered stationary nodes (”Red dots”).
- Empirical validation indicates that the informal economy functions as the “social glue” or spatial catalyst that promotes spontaneous social interactions [3]. By providing an immediate, unprogrammed reason to pause, vending nodes transition transient passersby into long-duration participants, validating the Dabali as an urban ”third place.”

3) Layer 3: Spatial Responsiveness and the Daily Pulse (Testing Carr’s Liminality)

The Basantapur Dabali does not function as a static, singular spatial void; it operates as a highly responsive series of physical and temporal layers.

- Physical Thresholds and Compression Zones: The narrow arterial streets leading to the Dabali from the east act as high-density ”compression zones.” As pedestrians move through these tight pathways, the sudden spatial expansion of the open plaza provides a psychological ”release,” triggering a behavioral switch from goal-oriented transit to leisurely observation.

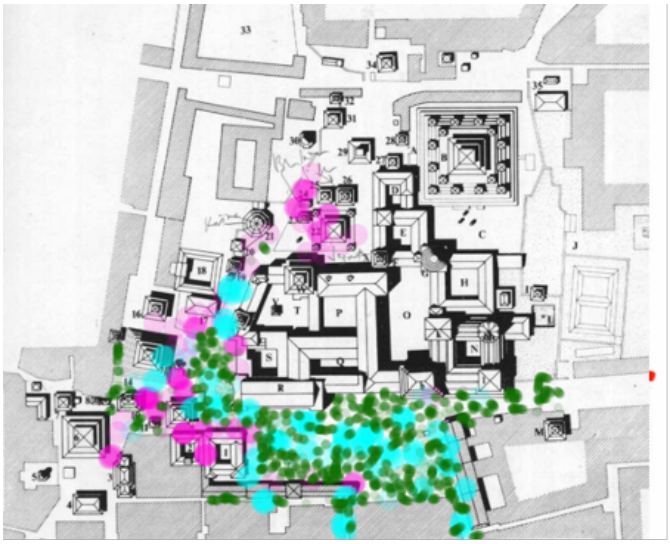

Figure 18. Movement Mapping in the Dabali From Morning to Evening

- Temporal Fluidity: The square exhibits a fluid, three-part daily pulse:

  – Morning (06:00 - 09:00): High density of Necessary Rituals, with behavioral clusters tightly packed around temple entrances and the Kumari Ghar axis.
  – Afternoon (12:00 - 16:00): High density of Optional Exhibition Use, with clusters redistributing around shaded zones and informal flea markets.

- Evening (17:00 - 19:00): High density of Social Leisure, where the square transforms completely into a ”communal living room” for local residents.

- Empirical Validation: This temporal elasticity allows conflicting user groups (devotees, vendors, and tourists) to seamlessly coexist within the same physical footprint without spatial friction.

4.3 Synthesis: The Mechanism of Responsive Liminality

When these three analytical layers are integrated, they reveal that the vitality of the Kathmandu Valley’s public space is driven by a systemic behavioral loop rather than isolated environmental variables:

Necessary Transit → Architectural Invitation → Optional Pause → Social Triangulation → Responsive Liminality

Optional Use → Social Interaction → Liminal Behavior

(e.g., resting, observing) → (e.g., vendors attract crowds, chatting) → (e.g., spontaneous rituals, group performance)

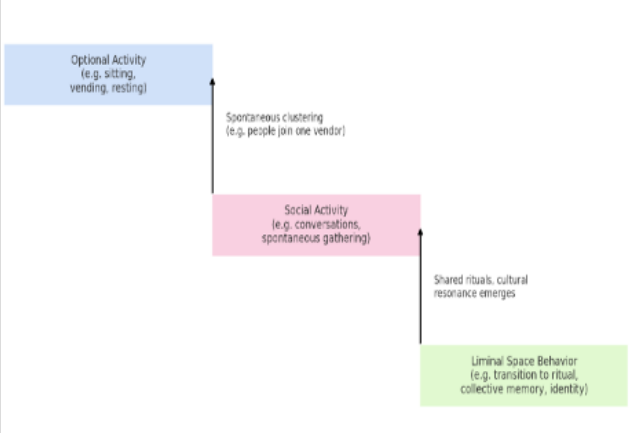

Figure 19. Transition of Optional Activities Towards Social Activities

Empirical data confirms that optional activities act as the critical liminal threshold required to unlock deep social engagement. When physical and cultural catalysts such as contemporary public art exhibitions, are introduced onto the platform, non-mandatory social interactions increase two-to-three-fold. The unique spatial configuration of the Newari urban common successfully captures high-velocity, regional pedestrian transit and converts it into a high-density, stationary communal presence. True urban vibrancy is sustained not by static monumentality or rigid architectural preservation, but by the plaza’s systemic, built-in capacity to remain ”betwixt and between”, constantly transitioning between a sacred ritual sanctuary and a secular civic stage.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the vitality of the Basantapur heritage core is inextricably linked to its role as a flexible, liminal threshold. Moving beyond generic Western assessments of public space, the empirical findings prove that the spatial narrative and inherent elasticity of the Newar urban fabric allow these traditional spaces to remain highly socially responsive amid modern pressures. Cultural continuity is maintained not through static, frozen preservation, but through active, lived experience on the Dabali stage. For future heritage management and urban planning within the Kathmandu Valley, this research recommends a decisive shift toward an inclusive urbanism that prioritizes the ”spaces between.” By ensuring that these historic liminal zones remain morphologically permeable, structurally shaded, and accommodating of informal economies, contemporary planners can sustain the diverse social interactions that define a living, resilient city.

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