



Madan Chitrakar, *A temple at Pashupatinaath*, Watercolor, 1995

City Orientation of Nepali Art Forms

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Abstract

City orientation is the principal feature of Nepali art. Nature and art coalesce in the Nepal Mandala, a unique story of the grand consonance between urban and rural culture. The principal motif of urbanity in Nepali art appears in the structuration of the principal cities of the Nepal Mandala. The phenomenon of the structuration of buildings and towns or cities speaks volumes about the relationship between art and urban structures. We find careful and skilled structures of the city spaces in the Nepal Mandala. That is obviously the domain of architecture, sculpture, and paintings. Separate works are written by native and foreign scholars and academics about this subject but the phenomenon of the unique relation of the city structure and artistic imagination has received little attention from writers and interpreters. But the subject has come in the principal interpretations and theorisation of scholars. Some of these features are discussed in this article.

Keywords: city orientation, poetics of architecture, praxis of paintings, inter-art

City Orientation

The subject of city orientation in Nepali art, especially paintings, architecture and their poetic element, has occupied my mind for quite some time. As an interpreter of these forms, I have alluded to the subject in a number of my previous articles about the treatment of the city by sculptors, architects and poets. The city orientation in Nepali art, therefore, is a broad-based subject. To discuss this subject, we have to take a

broader perspective that encompasses the related features of these art forms. That is an important topic of discussion. I have come across a few studies and discourses exclusively discussed by critics on this broader subject. A study of this theme represents the spirit and features of the other related forms. I have chosen the Nepal Mandala as the locus of this article. This sounds like a proposition for a book on this subject, but my belief is that the inter-art approach is heuristically preferable

in broad or brief discussions of this theme. I hypothesize that the overt or covert purpose of writing on each of these forms is to highlight the character of the other; they are related in some subtle ways. For example, the rich sculptural works of art in the Nepal valley create forms that are poetic in nature. Paintings of different times and forms represent the same inter-art spirit. Poets address this spirit in their writings. We should select them to see their inter-art character. I hypothesize that each of the above forms becomes manifest in the other. I find strong city orientation in each of these forms.

City orientation is the principal feature of Nepali art. Nature and art coalesce in the Nepal Mandala, which is a unique story about the grand consonance of urban and rural culture. The principal motif of urbanity in Nepali art appears in the structuration of the principal cities of the Nepal Mandala. The phenomenon of the structuration of buildings and towns or cities speaks volumes about the relationship between art and urban structures. We find careful and skilled structures of the city spaces in the Nepal Mandala. That is obviously the domain of architecture, sculpture, and paintings. Separate works are written by native and foreign scholars and academics about this subject but the phenomenon of the unique relation of the city structure and artistic imagination has received little attention from writers and interpreters. But the subject has come in the principal interpretations and theorisation of scholars. Some of these features are discussed in this article.

City and art are brought together through architectonic arrangements and planning. Such arrangements are made by projecting anthropomorphic energy or power as the shaper of the cities and towns. For example, spaces are created for the community to meet. People of different generations meet in the

open spaces. But there is another side to it—the bringing of nature in the art works. This challenging side is addressed by artists in subtle ways. Artists and designers developed innovative ways to do that. The gist of the argument is that artists have developed various ways of bringing nature in different art forms and city elements along with that. Art forms have become part of the rhythm and markers of life. An attempt has been made to briefly address the main methods and concepts subsumed under the rubric "city orientation of Nepali art".

To sum it up, we can draw on paintings, poetry, architecture, and sculpture to discuss the city orientation of Nepali art. Each topic has generated productive discussions that we can see from various studies available to us. Only some features of the city as seen in these art forms are discussed in the following section.

I want to put my hypothesis at the very beginning of this essay. It can be seen that each form or genre of art overtly or covertly shows the features of the city. The urban element is present in them in some very important ways. One paradox should be mentioned here. As a matter of rule or expectation, Nepali art should be entirely nature-oriented. The reason for it is that Nepal is a country of rural energy, dynamics, and life force that emanates from the diverse features of the geography, flora, and fauna. This is a country of villages. By the same token, we may say, everything, including our aesthetic perceptions, should be shaped by the selfsame phenomenon. But structures, or designs of not only the cities—though they were never big, talking in terms of their spread and domination—but also of other forms of art, including the verbal forms as well, appear to be shaped by the city or urban elements. I have cited some verses later.

Poetics of Architecture

In the following paragraphs I want to briefly discuss the features of architecture, sculpture and poetry in order to show the city orientation of art. For lack of space, I only want to cite some representative works and interpretations of scholars and critics as well as some works of poets for that purpose. References to some of my own works as used by interpreters in some sections tend to show my association or visceral element and pursuit of studies in this area. I want to begin by alluding to discussions about the poetic aspects of the architectonic features of the city.

In "*Poetics of Newar Space*" (2025), Shiva Rijal explores how the architecture of the Kathmandu Valley is not merely a physical arrangement of buildings but a poetic and performative production of urban life. Across the book's ten chapters, he argues that Newar art, architecture, and city planning are inseparable from the lived experience of the city, where sacred spaces function as stages for ritual, social interaction, and everyday life.

A central chapter, "*Vikramaśīla Mahāvihāra and the Poetics of Newar Space*," examines the architectonic features of the historic *mahāvihāra* located at the heart of Thamel. Rijal contends that the *vihāra*'s significance lies in the confluence of space and architectural form. The carefully organized courtyard, shrines, gateways, and circulation of visitors together create a poetic urban environment in which art is experienced through movement and participation rather than as isolated objects.

Rijal further describes these intentionally designed *bahās* and *mahāvihāras* as a "production of space," emphasizing that urban space is culturally constructed

through architecture, ritual practice, and collective memory. Elsewhere in the book, he characterizes such spaces as the "architectural setting for the real-life drama," suggesting that the city itself becomes a theatre where religious ceremonies, festivals, and everyday encounters constitute continuous performances.

The most distinctive contribution of Rijal's theory is his recognition of the performativity of architectural structures. Drawing on his background as a theatre scholar, he interprets Newar urban architecture as an active medium that choreographs human movement, ritual action, and social relationships. Consequently, the enduring theme running through all ten chapters is the poetics of Newar space—the idea that the aesthetic, symbolic, and performative qualities of architecture collectively shape the cultural identity and lived experience of the Kathmandu Valley.

Shiva Rijal calls the gradual loss of the original force of the architectonic and poetic forms a crisis. To show how theatre and artworks can project the strong side of what is there, Rijal has alluded to some plays and paintings in his books. Rijal has directly alluded to my plays in which he worked as a director and architect, and the strong and eloquent paintings of a senior artist Hari Prasad Sharma. A huge tome of his paintings titled *Nepal Down the Ages* makes it easier to view them. I think it would be contextual to cite a paragraph from Rijal here for clarity:

The chapter aims to read this crisis through the works of Abhi Subedi and Hari Prasad Sharma both known for writing poetry and executing excellent paintings of Newar architectural and cultural heritage of the Kathmandu Valley, respectively. Subedi's *Kathmandu Odyssey* (1996), *Dreams of Peach*



Hari Prasad Sharma, Mandev establishing the Garuda pedestal, oil on canvas, 2017

Blossoms (2001), and *Bruised Evenings* (2008) directly deal with the architecture and performance cultures of the valley. Similarly, Hari Prasad Sharma's over three decades of *sādhana*, or creative practice, have mainly concentrated on Newar culture. Sharma, who regards himself a Parvate Bahun or a hill Brahmin, is a local of the Valley and is familiar with the Newar social and cultural order. (Rijal 2025:15).

Hari Prasad Sharma's paintings, his skilled and consummate delineation of the theme of space deserve serious attention in discussions of space and city, and mainly about the relationship between cityscape and paintings. History becomes an integral part of these paintings. I have commented on Sharma's paintings at different times. I want to quote

some lines that are directly related to my article here. I wrote the following for an English-language daily:

Creating panorama, landscape and humanscape through lines, figurality and colours is the speciality of these paintings. My favourite side of these paintings is the creation of the cityscape and the kinaesthetic human element filling such architectural spaces....These paintings are the results of Sharma's passionate quest in the realms of architectonic and human relationships. What is remarkable about Sharma's paintings is his sense of space, structure, and performance, which he treats as the three essential factors of culture, bonding, and faith. (Subedi, "Nepali Times...").

Architects and scholars like Sudarshan Raj Tiwari (2023), Neils Gutschow (2025), Biresh Shah (2025), and others have written about the very important link between the city and the arts. The space of the city is evoked by them. The other subject of the relationship between art and city is the historicity and culture. The subject of the gradual evolution of the city and the role of the artistic character in that is a very important subject. In the prologue to his book, Bhaktapur Tiwari sums this up in these words: "This book seeks to present the larger story of historical and cultural evolution of the town, the palace and the public places seeking to reveal the physical and social context of their development, planning and architecture through a peek at the times and personalities of history, which have been critical in shaping them." Tiwari has written with elaboration on this theme in his earlier book *The Ancient Settlements of the Kathmandu Valley* (2011). This is a very productive subject. Some good writings of native and foreign scholars are available on this subject. They have stressed on both the historicity and the present conditionality of the cities, mainly in the Kathmandu Valley. My interest is in the ways art has played a role in shaping the form and concept of creative urbanity in Nepal. Examples of this subject are available in plenty in other cultures and countries as well. That is beyond the scope of my short intervention.

We can get a glimpse of the monuments and architectonic sites in a 1975 publication (second edition published in Kathmandu in 2015), a book written by a Swiss architect, Carl Pruscha. This may be seen as a big index to visual sites and monuments of the Kathmandu Valley. They are classified and identified as "32 preservation districts, 34 monument zones, 29 natural preservation districts and 888 individual monuments

and sites". (Pruscha). Though the sites have changed today and the burgeoning cities have engulfed several of them, we can see a picture of how the architectonic forms of different genres have gone into the making of the cities of Nepal Mandala. (Subedi, "Pruscha's Kathmandu Valley.") At a specific level, we can see how Gautamvajra Vajracharya has discussed the minuscule and artistic features of Hanumandhoka in his book (Vajracharya, 2033 BS). He shows how Hanumandhoka represents the poetics of space and architecture in Nepal Mandala through the works of the unnamed artists. I want to cite my comments about this book, published in an article titled "*Open Space in Nepal Mandala: A Personal Quest for Theatre*" (Subedi, In Shiva Rijal ed. Talking Spaces (2025)). "Hanuman Dhoka also shows how the structure of a space can continue to exist as the locus of creative study that includes history, art, culture, and power. Vajracharya is known to link the sky, earth, mortals, and the divines in his interpretation of the city space. He is known to foreground human agency as the maker and shaper of the space in such interpretations."

Poetry and Inter-art Dimension

There is a whole body of works that show how the architectonic forms have created the cityscapes and modes of the art forms. I want to allude to other examples of art like paintings and poetry to show how these forms are related to the city. However, poetic forms cover the broader ecological aspects. But the works that I have found show how different forms of art address the features of the city. I want to begin with poetic genre of literature. The poets had clearly adopted a new technique for presenting a sense of irony and expressing the desire for expansion and self-reflection. But the modern consciousness appeared in art and poetry in a somewhat

similar manner in the decades that followed. I have called this "Poetic ecology of Nepal Mandala." (Subedi 2024).

I want to cite a poem that shows the merger of sculpture and poetry. The work of the sculptor shows that the artist is working in a city space. The following poem was written in the 1950s of the twentieth century by poet Kedar Man Vyathit. The title of the poem is *Silpa Sadhana*, or "the practice of sculpture," translated by Michael Hutt, Professor Emeritus of Nepali at SOAS, London. The poem goes like this. I cite the entire poem for the sake of clarity and for projecting the sense of inter-art passion:

Slowly striking the chisel,
tap, tap, tap,
the sculptor steps back from time to time
to regard the image he carves,
pleased, grave, discontented by turn
On this the fifth of Chaitra
a great procession passes by,
at Pashupati the Gita sings
the glory of action's way,
in every quarter the Pandava roars,
clamouring for the rights.
At half-past one the radio gives out
the programme for the Buddha Jayanti,
at Anandkuti the sermons run on,
but still it does not cease:
the sculptor's tap, tap, tap.
Though the Pope may send from Rome
a message of Christmas greetings,

some Asian lands still bathe in blood:

it is only on paper pages

that the Bible goes abroad.

But Buddha, Jesus, Krishna give

their blessings to the tapping sound,

and a statue of Gandhi smiling down,

pronounces his "Amen."

(Kedar Man Vyathit. Trans. Michael Hutt)

For lack of space, I cannot cite more examples. But I want to indicate how poetry, like art, shows the features of the city and the place of an individual there. Loneliness and quest for self-identity became manifest in poetry as early as the fifties of the last century. Cities of the Nepal valley, especially Kathmandu, became the subject in poetry. A poet already views the image of a modern persona in the city. Siddhicharan Shrestha presents an individual in Kathmandu city in the fifties of the last century in a poem titled "Mero pratibimba" (My reflection), in which he presents the city individual as

A shape without beauty

A language without feelings

A man without soul

Thoughts closed on all sides

That's my own image

Coming along the path.

(My translation)

In the modernist poems written in later times, the dramatic relationship between the individual and the city constitutes the subject matter of the oeuvre. But there is a very interesting history of how the poets of the rural areas who visited Kathmandu city

expressed their feelings about the city in a country of villages.

There are some responses from poets born in the countryside. I present the verse of a rural poet, Pahalman Subedi, whose impression of Kathmandu city, formed over a century ago, is presented in simple idioms. I grew by listening to this poem in the remote hills of Terathum. Pahalman, the village poet, composed the following poem after first visiting Kathmandu:

Hills around

Big flat space in the middle

A city that wakes up

In the tingling sounds of cycles

Where animals roam freely

I'll describe this city in sawai

Minutely, oh listener!

(My translation. Subedi "Open Space...")

However, the famous poet Bhanu Bhakta Acharya (1814 -1869), aka *Adikavi*, translated as 'premier poet' by literary critics, wrote a slightly different poem at his first encounter with Kathmandu city in a poem titled '*Balaju*'. It is full of allusions used by the learned poet of the village. But his surprise and awe represent his rural nature. The first entry point for the poet travelling from rural Tanahun to Kathmandu was Balaju. Struck by the beauty of the well-made Balaju park poet Bhanu Bhakta Acharya described the space of the city in this manner:

I saw Balaju today

After these many days

And writing this verse,

Knowing that

This is heaven on earth

Birds serenade

Swinging in the vines

Oh, how they lure you

By their sweet melodies!

(My translation).

Praxis of Paintings

I want to briefly discuss the praxis of paintings in the cities of the Kathmandu Valley. As I do not have space to discuss this subject, I only want to allude to some features of paintings and their relationship with the cities of the Kathmandu Valley.

I want to refer to my article "*Widening sphere of modern art and literature in Nepal: A Study of the Interface between them*" published in *Sirjanā*, VII, 2021. I discussed the training of Nepali artists in a modern art school in Calcutta and the historical context of the orientalist debate going on there during that time. This is an important point of the study of modern paintings in Nepal. I have put the following:

My theory is that modernism in art in this region should be traced through certain conspicuous changes in the practice of painting, not least in the context of the twin influences of Western styles and art education and of the native tradition. The high critical canons will speak only partially about the spirit and history of modernism in this region. Following modernism in art in this region, therefore, is the study of the evolution of new modes and methods of paintings, sculptures and architecture. (Subedi 2021:

Paintings have two broad categories here. Traditional paintings have a direct

relationship with the denizens of the valley, mainly the Newars and the ruling families, whose artists used styles ranging from the Rajasthani to the Western. Portrait making of the rulers shows these influences. As mentioned earlier, Hari Prasad Sharma evokes major stylistic forms of traditional paintings.

Modern painters have not directly evoked the cityscapes in their paintings. But by using modernist forms and by establishing and institutionalizing the praxis of art pedagogy, exhibitions of paintings, running of modern art galleries, and maintaining regularities of art activities in Kathmandu, artists and their curators have contributed to the establishment of a metropolitan art culture that includes paintings, sculptures, and architectural forms. Well-funded art institutions and academic centers all located in the metropolis of the Kathmandu Valley, have given established shapes to the modern city.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I want to say there is no linear history of the Nepali metropolis and the contribution of art forms to that. But as discussed in this paper, art forms in various ways have played important roles in creating the city or metropolitan culture and shape of Kathmandu. The forms are different. As discussed in the paper, they range from architectonic, sculptural, and poetic forms to the execution and practice of paintings. One important question that needs to be mentioned is that the Kathmandu Valley has, for centuries, remained the locus of art activities of various forms as outlined in the paper. The evolution of art institutions and their praxis have happened in the Kathmandu Valley metropolitan area. A strong meta-artistic approach is necessary to interpret this phenomenon which is imbued with historic, artistic, literary and political features.

The last one is evoked here because the Kathmandu Valley has remained the center of power and rule. Some huge architectonic forms constructed during the Rana rule still stand as functional structures. One other point should be mentioned, especially in the case of the architectonic forms. Both the traditional and modern forms that include the Asian Baroque buildings were exclusively constructed for some class or personas, rulers or their courtiers. But one thing is constant and persistent, which is the use of artistic forms of various natures and styles. One important difference between the traditional architectonic spaces and the interior structures of the Asian Baroque buildings is that the former spaces were made for the common people and the communities, whereas the interiors of the Asian Baroque buildings were exclusively reserved for families of the rulers. This comes to the same conclusion—the city orientation of Nepali art is a reality and a productive subject for study, research and art pedagogy.

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