

# Placemaking Through Time in Nepal: Conceptualising the Historic Urban-Rural Landscape of Kathmandu

Xiang Ren <sup>1</sup> , Sangeeta Singh <sup>2</sup> , Abhishek Bhutoria <sup>1</sup>, and Huriye Armağan Doğan <sup>1</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> School of Architecture and Landscape, University of Sheffield, UK

<sup>2</sup> Institute of Engineering, Tribhuvan University, Nepal

**Correspondence:** Xiang Ren ([xiang.ren@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:xiang.ren@sheffield.ac.uk))

**Submitted:** 13 July 2024 **Accepted:** 28 January 2025 **Published:** 9 April 2025

**Issue:** This article is part of the issue “Place-Shaping Through and With Time: Urban Planning as a Temporal Art and Social Science” edited by NezHapi-Dellé Odeleye (Anglia Ruskin University), Lakshmi Priya Rajendran (University College London), and Aysegul Can (Karlsruhe Institute of Technology), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/up.i393>

## Abstract

The ever-densifying and developing cities from the rapidly urbanising Global South are still facing severe socio-cultural challenges driven by the rapid urbanisation and tourism development, including the loss of architectural heritage, cultural memory, place identity, informal ecology, and economy in and around the historic urban landscape (HUL) particularly. Following the call for a “peri-urban turn” in recent geographical and urban studies, this article conceptually extends the established HUL framework to a broader historic urban-rural landscape (HURL) framework for the evolving and underrepresented territories of the Southern cities. It includes and interprets the local community’s placemaking practices and agency in the context of transitional rural-to-urban dynamics. Through ethnographic fieldwork in the historic environment of Kathmandu, Nepal, and by exploring the Basantapur area’s living heritage setting for the local community’s transient, rural, and ritual practices, this article develops an urban-anthropological interpretation of tangible and, of increasing relevance in the Global South contexts, intangible cultural heritage from the local community’s perspective, narratives, and agency. The article argues for a shift in focus from approaching the urban heritage buildings, urban-rural landscape, and intangible cultural heritage separately from the HUL which traces the past, to a more transitional, evolving, and layered HURL which anchors the present. It concludes with HURL’s methodological capacity to further close reading of Southern places through time and the lifeworld constituted and embedded in the placemaking practice beyond the Eurocentric tradition and paradigms.

## Keywords

Basantapur; cultural heritage; Global South; Historic Urban Landscape; Kathmandu; placemaking

## 1. Introduction

There has been a globally shifted focus in heritage-led placemaking and regeneration in the past 20 years, from the focus on the single component of building and landscape heritage, or heritage conservation area, to an integrated and evolving historic urban landscape (HUL). The emergence of the conceptual framework of HUL, which was first put forward at the UNESCO Vienna conference in 2005 (UNESCO, 2005), has developed its core concept from the predominantly Western concepts mainly based on Patrick Geddes's urban heritage conservation of cultural landscape (Geddes, 1915) and Gordon Cullen's townscapes (Cullen, 1971). The 2011 Historic Urban Landscape Recommendation by UNESCO calls for a comprehensive and integrated approach to the identification, assessment, conservation, and management of HULs within an overall sustainable development framework that shifted the focus from "monuments," namely objects and elements, to "landscapes," namely systems and processes (UNESCO, 2011). This has advanced a changing dimension of heritage discourse and practice since the adoption of an integrated approach towards heritage evaluation and preservation does not merely affect the structure itself but also creates an impact on the environment (Zaleckis et al., 2022). Therefore, the principles and approaches for managing historic built environment have grown from "monument" to a slightly larger concept of historic site, then to "setting," areas, "landscapes," cities, and finally to the HUL. The various successive enlargements of "heritage" have created an all-inclusive concept of the "historic environment" (Veldpaus et al., 2013; UNESCO, 2016). As Taylor summarised, central to the HUL are three underlying principles: (a) understanding of the city as an evolving process—living entity—not merely a series of objects such as buildings, with the idea of "process" embracing intangible cultural heritage values, genius loci, and interaction between culture and nature; (b) respect for the overall morphology of the city and its landscape setting so that future development does not overwhelm the landscape physically or its intangible meanings and values; and (c) understanding that conservation of physical and material aspects of urban landscape must be balanced taking into account immaterial aspects to do with layers of meanings residing in the urban landscape (Taylor, 2016).

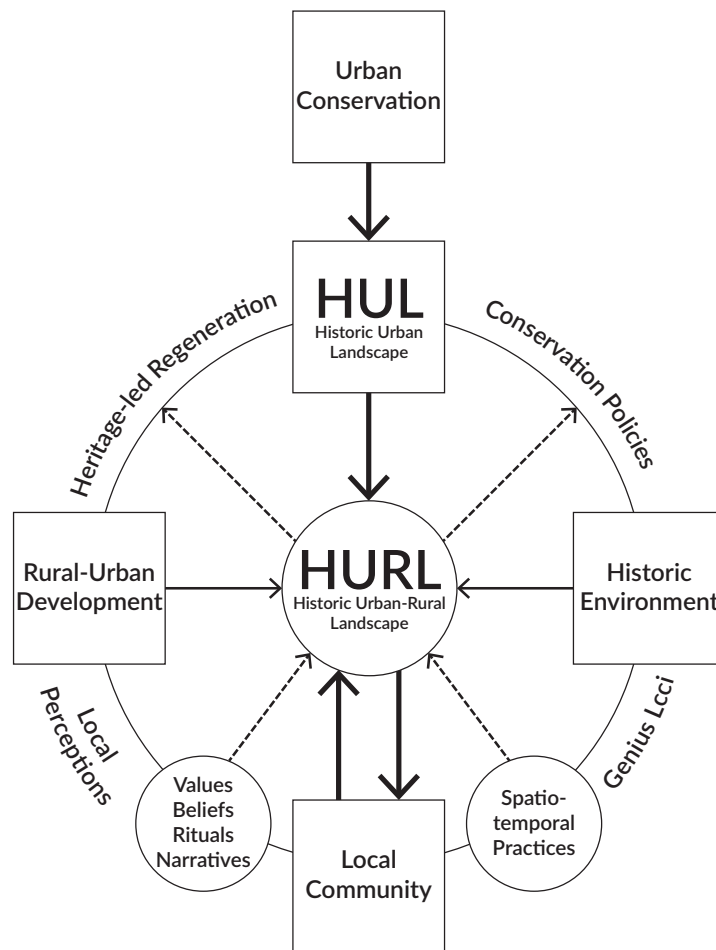
HUL further articulates the subtly different, and contrasting, heritage conservation philosophies at the root of the Western concepts, which come mainly from the UK and the European continent, with the former built upon John Ruskin's positioning on the preservation of urban heritage fabric consisting of varied assemblies (Ruskin, 1989), and the latter mostly following Viollet-le-Duc's (1990) structural rationalism framework of restoration of built heritage and historic landscape. Influenced strongly by John Ruskin, the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings in the UK, founded by William Morris and others in 1877, defends that buildings should be preserved as found with minimal interventions, and any additions should be distinguished from the original status without confusing both statuses (Morris, 1877). This Western-oriented framework has heavily shaped, and been reconfirmed by, a series of international charters such as the Venice Charter, which in Article 12 states that in restoration, replacements for missing parts must integrate harmoniously, whilst remaining distinguishable from the original so as not to falsify the artistic or historic evidence (ICOMOS, 1964), and also the Burra Charter in its several revisions since 1979 and the Appleton charter since 1983. The Nara document on authenticity in 1993 marked a critical moment in the history of conservation, as for the first time it sought the establishment of internationally applicable conservation principles with the inclusion of non-Western traditions and practices, addressing key areas such as "intangible cultural heritage, its cultural context and its evolution through time" (ICOMOS, 1993).

Although the HUL approach is still not formally recognized in the World Heritage Convention (Denison & Ren, 2022), the conceptual framework of HUL has promoted a more holistic approach to historic environments around the world, with an emphasis on the evolving layers of historic and social values of that spatio-temporal built fabric over time, rather than sticking to or returning to a particular time period. However, questions and arguments have emerged due to the 2011 Recommendation lacking coherent definitions, methods, and tools for the implementation of the HUL concept. Notably, HUL is predominantly focused on urban conservation and regeneration. Without a strategic vision for implementation frameworks, the HUL approach risks dissolving and remaining only an attempt to update conservation practices in the context of urbanity (Palaiologou & Fouseki, 2017). The ongoing, evolving, and progressive rural–urban transition in the evolving territories of the Global South requires a Southern theory to address the specific conditions and diversities in adopting and approaching HUL. Hosagrahar (2005) made a powerful start by reclaiming the Indigenous form of architecture, landscape, and city in, of, and from their respective modern ones. Robinson (2016) destabilised the Northern domination in theorising the urban by reimagining the southern practice of cities through comparative studies. Forster et al. (2018) highlighted the Western and Eastern conservation philosophical differences and cross-fertilisation on permanence/impermanence and tangibility/intangibility. H. B. Shin (2021) continued to question the core location of the theorising from de-centring Global East and South perspectives. Yiftachel and Mammon (2022) further stressed that in the South and East there are important roles for informal development and economies, religion, collective identities, and neocolonial processes that are often ignored by Northern theories. Woudstra et al. (2023) reminded the fundamental definition of landscape as the physical world as perceived by people, and which is the object of study, representation, design, and care to satisfy people’s aesthetic, ethical, and other wants. O’Brien-Kop et al. (2024) echoed and embedded an Asia-centric perspective instead of the Euro-centric one in contemporary cultural heritage studies. More specifically, there has appeared an interconnected call for a “peri-urban turn” in recent architectural, geographical, and urban studies, with emphasis on reimagining urban–rural places through place narratives, human agency, and local worlds, instead of the existing research on flows and linkages (Rai & Singh, 2019; Rajendran et al., 2024; Ren, 2023; Tang, 2014).

From the above, and reflecting on how the HUL concept itself and its approach are deeply grounded in Eurocentric theories and predominantly urban precedents, this article conceptualises an alternative historic urban–rural landscape (HURL) theoretical framework, which opines that heritage-led conservation, regeneration, and development should follow a holistic approach to understand the HURL as an evolving spatio-temporal system that frames the historic environment of Southern place in transition (see Figure 1).

## 2. HURL

The ever-densifying and developing cities in the rapidly urbanising Global South are generally facing severe socio-cultural challenges driven by the rapid urbanisation and tourism development, including the loss of architectural heritage, social value, cultural memory, place identity, informal ecology, and economy in and around the HUL particularly. The HURL framework is conceptualised here to develop a more nuanced understanding of the relationships between both the tangible and intangible cultural heritage of HUL, rurality, rural–urban transition, as well as the local knowledge and ritual practices from the local community (Blundell-Jones, 2016). It is important to expand the notion of local knowledge and learn from place intelligence that has made the historical environments resilient and meaningful over centuries when the HULs are evaluated (Hosagrahar, 2021). Furthermore, it is crucial to follow a multilateral approach, which



**Figure 1.** A diagram of HURL and its relational ecologies.

contains the determination of changes, not only about the growth and development through history but also the changes in society both at the local and national levels (Shin et al., 2015). Therefore, HURL aims to engage with contemporary issues about how relational practices can be deployed to alleviate the challenges that most cities of the Global South have already faced, or will confront in the near future, and what lessons can other HULs of the Global North learn from the South. By situating and developing spatio-temporal narratives from community perspectives on architecture, public space, and landscape in the wider socio-cultural and economic contexts of the Global South, the HURL framework includes the following four core approaches:

1. Close reading the urban-rural placemaking practices in the historic environments, predominantly in the present, via a spatio-temporal and urban-anthropological lens, investigating how and why those practices are operated and how they are continued and contested in the existing context;
2. Mapping the relational ecologies of the intangible cultural heritage through relating urban-rural landscape, public space, architecture, and ritual practices as an interconnected whole, and their multiple narratives in the rapid urbanisation, in order to provide an understanding of evolving spatio-temporal systems, contrasting them with the frozen urbanisation-based narratives;
3. Bringing together communities, academics, practitioners, and policymakers from different sectors to reflect on the evolving role and meaning of HURL in the rapidly urbanising Global South cities over time,

investigating what, why, and who determines the new yet contested interventions, for what end, and for whose benefit;

4. Addressing methodological issues and challenges of approaching intangible cultural heritage from a spatio-temporally perspective, particularly around issues of ethnographic fieldwork and community engagement by studying the intersection of cultural meaning and identity, historical and development contexts that are transitional in nature, framing the place narratives and consequent placemaking practices.

The HURL framework and approach builds on the critical position that the HURL and its associated intangible cultural heritage that evolved along the rural–urban transition, as a praxis and a verb, are socially constructed by the local communities. Exchanging and sharing knowledge from local policymakers and heritage experts is important, but local community’s experience and knowledge in adapting the framework to their own development are more important. Who decides and who benefits matters most in local contexts. There might be some potential challenges while implementing the HURL framework, such as political resistance, funding constraints, or issues with community participation. In that regard, developing strategies to mitigate these challenges can strengthen the HURL framework’s feasibility and practicality. These strategies include, for example, raising public awareness of the value and meaning of intangible cultural heritage in architecture, public space, and rural landscape as an integrated HURL; mapping different stories and community perspectives over time and how such narratives affect the decisions in the present context; and cultivating an inclusive model for future placemaking of marginalised, non-touristic heritage sites in the HURL of the Global South.

To test the validity of the proposed HURL framework and to analyse its strengths and potential challenges, an urban-anthropological study involving ethnographic observation, oral histories, and visual documentation was conducted in the city of Kathmandu, Nepal, particularly the Basantapur area, between 2023 and 2024. The city of Kathmandu was chosen as a “core location” (Baik, 2013), which is a strategic term coined by Young-Seo Baik and refers to a place with lived experiences of multiple layers of marginality from the Global North. Until the 18th century, the term Nepal was restricted to the Kathmandu Valley. Situated within the Himalayan mountainous and cultural area and interacting with the two great Asian religions of Hinduism and Buddhism in many ways, Kathmandu as a unique place is built upon Hindu, often combined with Buddhist, cosmological ideas (Toffin, 1997). As a cultural city originated from the 2nd Century BC, Kathmandu has experienced a long and layered development history that is strongly rooted in the socio-cultural cohesiveness and unique cultural practices, expressed through its many ancient temples, water conduits, and townscapes (Tiwari, 1990, 2010, 2015). Kathmandu preserves and presents a unique fusion of various rituals and religions that are attached to the historic urban–rural environment (see Figures 2 and 3) and its intangible cultural heritage (see Figures 4 and 5). Furthermore, this layered and fused urban process is still in transition. In more recent years, various projects in the Kathmandu Valley have touched upon the ethos of the HURL which resulted in revealing the impact of local community involvement; however, its reflection and impact on local policies are controversial (Bhatta & Chan, 2016; Chan & Bhatta, 2013). Together, these projects create the opportunity to analyse the modus operandi and learn from different strategies and narratives, which are related to both the past and the present of a transitional cultural heritage embedded in the HURL. Strategically, with Kathmandu’s geographical situation and its rapid urbanisation, the city’s economic development will be deeply bound to the strategic contribution from the HURL framework to the heritage-led regeneration.





Figure 2. Kathmandu's urban-rural landscape blends buildings, infrastructures, and mountains.



Figure 3. Kathmandu's informal spatio-temporal use in its historic environment.



Figure 4. The spatio-temporal flows and exchanges of Kathmandu's UNESCO World Heritage Site.





Figure 5. Kathmandu's placemaking based on a fusion of beliefs, rituals, space, and time.

### 3. Heritage and Development Context in Nepal

Economically, Nepal remains a disadvantaged country with an underwhelming situation despite enjoying a comparative advantage in tourism. The tourism sector, based on its rich natural and cultural heritage, is key to Nepal's economy: According to the *Nepal Tourism Statistics 2020* book, the country aims to attract more than 2.5 million tourists by 2025 (Nepal Government's Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation, 2020). An enhanced approach to cultural heritage will be a key driver for meeting this national target, with a more sustainable tourism industry for Nepal, and for its sustainable cities and communities in the context of rapid urbanisation. Specifically, after the Covid-19 pandemic, a positive update evidenced by the Department of Immigration shows that there has been a significant increase in tourism, with a registered 326,667 international tourists visiting Nepal from January to August 2022 (Nepal Government's Department of Immigration, 2022). This provides a timely opportunity to rethink and redevelop strategies and approaches to the architectural heritage in Nepal, in particular Kathmandu. Nepal's 16th Plan aims to decrease people living under the poverty line and the multidimensional poverty index from 20% to 12% by 2028. One of the key strategies is to unveil and preserve the built heritage along with the associated intangible components like arts, street festivals, religious activities, spirituality, and the HUL. With the greater authority given to local government after declaring Nepal as a federal-democratic nation in 2015, the HURL framework and approach creates a promising space for development justice for the disadvantaged local communities and their cultural meanings, and simultaneously for relieving the pressure from the commercialisation of heritage and their museumification as stagnant artefacts.

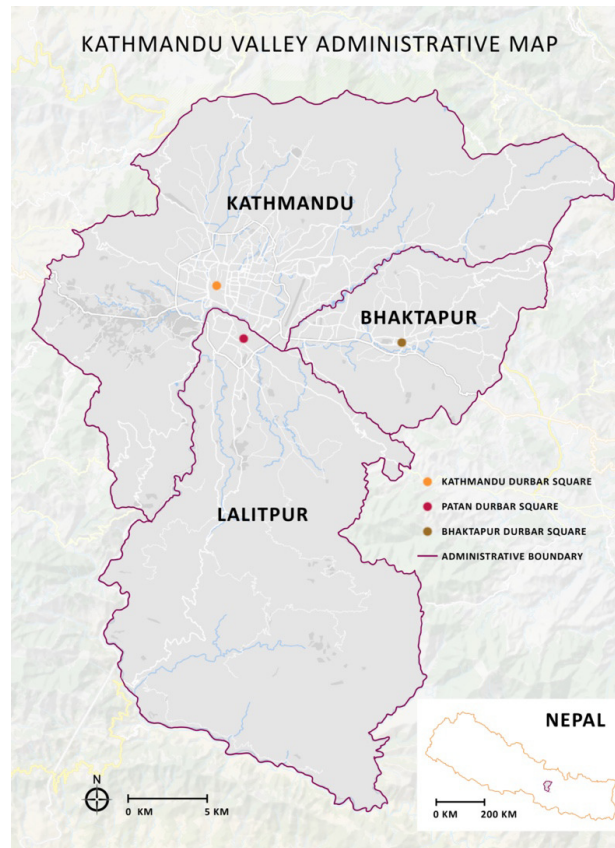
Socially and culturally, Nepal, especially Kathmandu, knows about preserving its heritage since the medieval period, as can be seen, for example, in the *Guthi* system, a cultural disposition. *Guthi* is a Nepali term for the system of organised institutions historically created to enhance the standard of living of the people (Tang et al., 2014). The tangible and intangible cultural heritage of Kathmandu has been globally recognized, evidenced by its tourism industry's steadily bouncing back from the earthquake and the pandemic. In today's heritage-conservation paradigm, this is comparable to the community-led grassroots movements, with the key actors always being local communities. Projects, like the *Parya Sampada* in Bungamati and the *Pro-Poor*

Urban Regeneration Pilot Project in Lalitpur, have the ethos of the HUL and integrate cultural meaning, identity, and most importantly, local people's cultural disposition. Together, they build a coherent narrative of the historic landscape, connecting historicity to the community's prosperity. Yet, these experiences have a limited impact on policies and on heritage researchers: They still tend to see heritage as artefacts detached from the community's everyday lives, and historic landscape in conflict with the aspirations of a more top-down urbanisation. On the other hand, there were some community-based projects in Kathmandu that managed to achieve an impact on the government with a bottom-up approach as well. A good example is the restoration of Ashok Chaitya in Thamel, which was one of the first projects performed by a community initiative. The project started with the initiative of a resident and, in a short period of time, the restoration of the temple was finished, with the help of funds sourced both from the municipality and the volunteers, with the remaining funds being kept for future maintenance. Furthermore, local artisans also worked with discounted rates, and other participants worked voluntarily as well (Lekakis et al., 2018). Another example is the reconstruction of the Kasthamandap building. After the 2015 earthquake, a group of self-motivated locals successfully campaigned for the reconstruction of the structure in order for the government to prioritise the rebuilding process and demanded a community-led construction (Joshi et al., 2021). While in the first example, the community partly worked in the construction process, in the second example, the community was more involved by their campaigning to the government for timely reconstruction and the transparency of the contracting process. However, both examples are based on individual buildings.

The HURL framework is thus conceptualised within this evolving context of economy, culture, and society in Nepal. It enhances a shifted focus from approaching heritage buildings, gardens, and intangible practices separately to a more integrated and layered HURL, reframing and rebranding the transitional historic environment of Kathmandu as a whole form of cultural heritage. The HURL framework also addresses Nepal's cultural apprehensions of historic cities and the demand for tourism and development-based economic prosperity of the local community in an integrated manner. Additionally, the HURL framework reintroduces the value and significance of the community's perspective on their own historic environment, which will generate wider awareness and deeper care from the inside.

To explore these dynamics, this article takes Basantapur, the historic city centre of Kathmandu and also the site of the Kathmandu Durbar Square—one of the World Heritage Sites listed by UNESCO in 2003—as a focused case study. The three Durbar squares of Kathmandu Valley—Kathmandu Durbar Square, Patan Durbar Square, and Bhaktapur Durbar Square—along with their surrounding areas represent a key HURL within the Kathmandu Metropolitan area (see Figure 6). These changing sites are essential for understanding the ongoing transition and transformation of the socio-cultural system shaped by the multiple interactions between rapid urbanisation, modernisation, tourism development, cultural heritage preservation, and the continuation of spatio-temporal narratives, rituals, and living heritage. Rapid urbanisation and densification within the Kathmandu Valley have led to the construction of modern structures and the commercialisation of parts of historically significant areas, replacing traditional livelihoods and local community practices with tourism-oriented and market-driven development (Singh & Dhakal, 2024). This process of the rural-to-urban transformation has intensified after the 2015 Gorkha earthquake, which further increases the fragility of this HURL, highlighting the precarity and challenges of maintaining cultural memory and place identity amid post-disaster reconstruction (Lekakis et al., 2018). Among the three Durbar squares in the Kathmandu Valley, Kathmandu Durbar Square of Basantapur has been particularly affected by densification and commercialisation pressure, leading to an inevitable and irreversible changing use of space, as the site is





**Figure 6.** Kathmandu Valley administrative areas.

situated within the city's central business district (KC et al., 2019). The dynamism of this changing HURL makes it a compelling site for examining the complex interplay between HURL, rapid urbanisation, heritage conservation, and the local community's agency and living tradition.

#### 4. Case Study of Basantapur, Kathmandu

The urban-anthropological approach to Basantapur as a transitional place takes root on the site-specific temporal and spatial practices through street and night market vendors in and around this core location. It involves ethnographic observation, oral history collection, and visual documentation of the spatial configuration and reconfiguration, temporary appropriation and reappropriation in this cultural and heritage site, both during daily routines and special festival seasons. Basantapur is the historic city centre of Kathmandu and its extended area continues to be so to date (see Figure 7). Its Durbar Square as a UNESCO World Heritage Site has been both a major tourist destination and a very crucial gathering place for the citizens of Kathmandu, acting as the nexus of cultural, economic, and social activities enclosed and exposed by its architecture and spatio-temporal juxtapositions (see Figure 8). It exudes a blend of both rural and urban characters, making it a dynamic urban-rural landscape for locals and tourists. The physical form of this evolving urban-rural landscape is composed of heritage, commercial, residential, social, and civic buildings, temples, monuments, courtyards, narrow alleys, open market spaces, parks, and bustling streets. This HURL showcases a rich tapestry of social and cultural heritage while also embracing the ever-evolving modernisation of urban life.



**Figure 7.** Basantapur and its surrounding fabric.



**Figure 8.** The spatio-temporal juxtaposition in the historic environment of the Durbar Square UNESCO World Heritage Site.

From an anthropological vantage point, the interpretative lens cast upon Basantapur evokes a pivotal query: Is the heritage of this vibrant locale undergoing reclamation, revitalisation, reconstruction, or indeed rebuilding? Each of these trajectories entails a distinctive vision, ethos, and methodological approach. The prevailing narrative and empirical scenario of Basantapur indicate that it is in a perpetual state of rebuilding its heritage, particularly in the aftermath of the 2015 earthquake. Historically, Basantapur has constantly been a nexus of vibrant cultural exchanges, activities, and life experiences catering to a diverse populace from hippies to devotees, locals to tourists, and vendors to strollers (Morimoto, 2015; Simone,

1989). Even after the earthquake, rebuilding its foundational heritage remains incessant. The amalgamation of contemporary edifices and practices within this historical site has lately been a subject of discourse and regular dialogue, critiqued for its perceived deviation from heritage as a discordant clash of cultures or as an encroachment upon the purity of heritage. Yet, it becomes pivotal to underscore that heritage and tradition, both in essence and practice, are inherently dynamic, an evolving construct, and not confined solely to architectural expressions.

Heritage fundamentally represents a selective product of a curated assemblage validated by societal consensus, while cultural heritage embodies an expression of living modalities, engendered by a community and transmitted intergenerationally, inclusive of practices, customs, rituals, locales, artistic renditions, tangible artefacts, and entrenched values (ICOMOS, 2002). By this axiom, for Basantapur's cultural heritage in transition, it could be postulated that it is being dynamically rebuilt and continued, bridging between its traditional roots and the imperatives of modern-day practices. This dialogue in both visual and experiential capacity refers to the interplay between tangible and intangible heritage of Basantapur, as observed through its architectural landscape, cultural practices and lived experiences of the people synchronously engaging with modernity, thereby shaping a continuum that is, in equal measure, a continuity to its resilient past, a reflection of its vibrant present, and a conscious navigation to its aspired promising future.

Basantapur, along with its contiguous vicinities, exemplifies an intricate confluence of historical continuity and contemporary urban-rural metamorphosis. Historically, the Dabali—an open public platform—has steadfastly served as an expansive canvas for vendors to showcase and sell local culinary delights, Indigenous crafts, and various artefacts to both Indigenous patrons and global tourists. Furthermore, this vibrant marketplace and communal space have expanded beyond its traditional role, metamorphosing into a dynamic epicentre for myriad community-centric engagements, ranging from festive commemorations, community programs and talks, twilight congregations, and other socio-cultural confluences. While modalities of these engagements have undergone temporal evolutions, Dabali's foundational role as a societal fulcrum remains unaltered (Chitrakar et al., 2017). Drawing a historic juxtaposition, Jhochhen once thrummed with a vibrant milieu comprising a *mélange* of native residents, transient travellers, myriad shops, and eclectic cafes patronised by both local denizens and the global bohemian populace. While certain erstwhile practices, such as sanctioned cannabis-centric establishments, may have waned, the street's inherent dynamism endures manifesting in bustling eateries (from local to global cuisine), avant-garde establishments, and an architectural juxtaposition of contemporary designs and Newari edifices.

On the way from Jhochhen to the Dabali, one witnesses devout individuals invariably converge upon various revered sanctuaries like the Taleju and Maju Dega Temple, among many other temples. Concurrently, both denizens and transient visitors often find moments of reflection, solace, and camaraderie on the temple steps and around the iconic Kasthamandap—the seminal wooden pavilion that bequeathed Kathmandu its nomenclature. Adjacent to the Dabali stands the majestic Hanuman Dhoka, a regal edifice tracing its lineage to the 17th century, that has been meticulously restored post its seismic tribulations. Although it has been repurposed as a museum prior to the aforementioned calamity, it now magnanimously anchors the vicinity, serving as both a historic tableau and a repository of narratives for its audience. A characteristic facet of Basantapur is its predominantly pedestrian-centric ethos during daylight hours, with restricted vehicular ingress post-sundown. This vehicular hiatus proffers a unique experiential dichotomy amidst the urbanity of Kathmandu's city centre characterised by vehicular cacophonies. The serpentine alleys punctuated by a



medley of commercial establishments, vernacular brick domiciles, and contemporary infrastructures encapsulate the very soul of Basantapur. This confluence of historical echoes, the palpable present, and a glimpse of forthcoming epochs collectively enshrine the HURL and living tradition of Basantapur.

#### 4.1. Civic and Ceremonial Traditions in Basantapur

As for its rural character, the Basantapur area is replete with intricately carved wooden windows and doors, pagoda-style tiered temples, and stone sculptures, with its HURL telling the tales of Kathmandu's distant and recent pasts. The narrow streets and alleys, small tea shops, local handicraft vendors, traditional Newari food stalls, the warm hospitality of locals, social gatherings on temple steps, shop fronts, and open market offer a glimpse and experience of traditional lifestyles, rituals, and customs that have continued over generations. Basantapur possesses a longstanding tradition of sustained civic and ceremonial practices that intensely contribute to the symbolic construction of its HURL. These ritual practices are deeply rooted in the Newar community's beliefs and values that have endured for centuries, embedding themselves into the physical and social fabric of the area. Serving as a focal point for various civic ceremonies, Basantapur integrates elements of community gatherings, religious devotion, cultural identity, social cohesion, and commercial engagement, affirming its significance as both a sacred site and a dynamic living heritage site. The HURL of Basantapur continually embodies a symbolic fusion of its historicity with the contemporary socio-cultural agency of its community, through the following five major transient ritual movements and practices (see Figure 9).

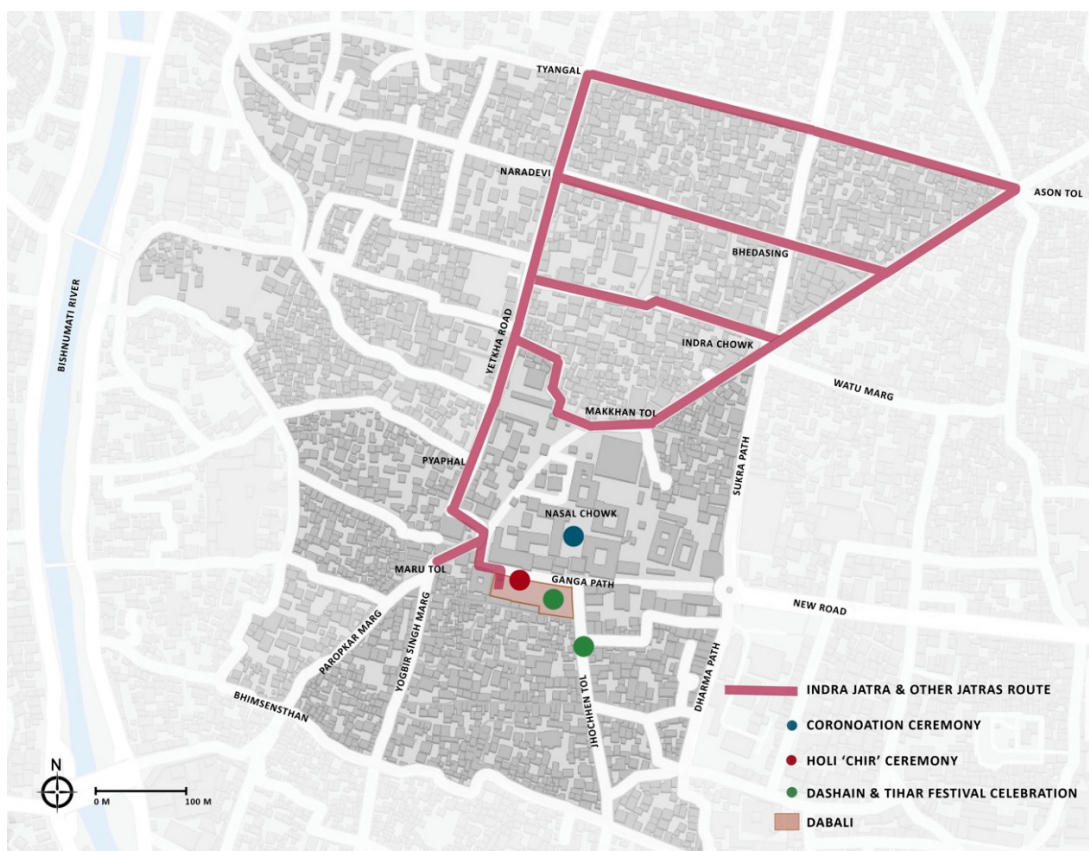


Figure 9. Kathmandu's temporary ritual practices across its transient HURL.



#### 4.1.1. Indra Jatra Festival

Celebrated each year for eight days in September, Indra Jatra is one of Kathmandu's most significant festivals, honouring Lord Indra, the deity of rain and the heavens. The festival marks the end of the monsoon season. This festival includes processions, masked dances, and the chariot parade of the Living Goddess Kumari through Basantapur and its surrounding—Ganga Path, Maru Tol, Pyaphak, Yetkha, Indra Chowk, Ason, and more, paying homage to the old Kathmandu. This festival not only strengthens religious beliefs but also reaffirms communal bonds, symbolically linking urban and rural residents and merchants for the celebrations (Nyaupane, 2024). Over the course of the eight-day festival, Basantapur further transforms into a hub of religious, cultural, social, and commercial activity preserving its historic urban–rural heritage.

#### 4.1.2. Dashain and Tihar Celebrations

These Hindu festivals, typically celebrated in October and November, bring unique expressions of faith and celebration to Basantapur. During Dashain, sacrificial rituals and blessings are hosted, drawing participants from diverse urban and rural backgrounds. Concurrently, events such as street concerts and food festivals are organised in Jochhen, Dabali, and Ganga Path. Tihar, the festival of lights, illuminates the homes, shops, cafes, restaurants, and temples of Basantapur. Streets are lively with people shopping, dining, and participating in celebrations. These celebrations have been reinforcing the social bond, community resilience, and the symbolic urban–rural landscape of Basantapur (Sengupta, 2023).

#### 4.1.3. Holi

The vibrant Hindu festival of colours, celebrated in February or March, brightens Basantapur as community members and visitors all across Kathmandu, Nepal, and other parts of the world come together to celebrate spring and renewal. Festivities begin with the installation of the *Chir*, a ceremonial bamboo bole adorned with colourful cloth strips at Ganga Path, signifying the start of Holi in the Kathmandu Valley. On the main day of Holi, Basantapur becomes a vibrant scene of joy as people play with powdered colours and water and celebrate it like a mass party with music and dance. This mass Holi party is followed by the Chir Dahan ceremony, a communal event in the evening, drawing together residents and visitors to participate in taking down and ceremonially burning the *Chir* along with the offerings they had brought. This act symbolises the victory of good over evil, and the ashes from the burned *Chir* are often considered auspicious, which the residents and visitors collect, believing they will bring good fortune. These events at Basantapur during Holi underscore the symbolic construction of the HURL.

#### 4.1.4. Jatras and Kumari

Throughout the year, various *Jatras* (ritual processions) and community gatherings are held in Basantapur, especially at Dabali and Ganga Path, as they honour numerous Hindu and Buddhist deities. Processions such as Seto Machindranath Jatra and Bhoto Jatra still follow ancient routes and draw wide community participation, connecting the area's social and religious life within this urban–rural landscape (Nyaupane, 2024). The *Kumari*, or Living Goddess, is a prepubescent girl worshipped as the earthly manifestation of the goddess Taleju in Nepal, particularly by the Newar community. The most prominent *Kumari* resides in the Kumari Ghar, a beautifully carved traditional building in Kathmandu Durbar Square. Selected through a

rigorous process based on physical and spiritual criteria, the *Kumari* serves as a cultural and religious symbol, bridging Hindu and Buddhist traditions. She plays a significant role in festivals like Indra Jatra, where her blessings are believed to bring prosperity and protection.

#### 4.1.5. Coronation Ceremonies

Nasal Chowk within Kathmandu Durbar Square has historically served as the coronation site for Nepalese monarchs due to its deep cultural, historical, and religious significance. This tradition dates back to the Malla period, when the courtyard functioned as a primary venue for royal events and governance. The Shah dynasty maintained this tradition, and the architecture of Nasal Chowk contributed to its appropriateness as a coronation venue until the last monarch (King Gyanendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev).

#### 4.2. *Basantapur as a Living Heritage: The Fusion of Tradition, Urbanisation, and Resilience*

Beyond the above sacred events and community gatherings, Basantapur is also a place for secularised political gatherings, charity events, food camps, and cultural performances, which further contribute to the ongoing symbolic construction of its HURL. It is noteworthy that the above-mentioned traditional cultural practices, festivals, and rituals of the Newar community are an integral part of the rural identity of Basantapur. The vivid festival and ritual celebrations inside the houses, on the streets, and in open spaces animate the atmosphere with vibrancy, celebration, and pride, and are reminiscent of the lifeworld from the historic eras. Locals clad in traditional attire perform age-old rituals through dance, performance, prayers, and collective activities at home and then on the streets, paying homage to their deities and strengthening the bond with their traditions and cultural roots with no distinctions of inside or outside, architecture or landscape, rural or urban (see Figure 10).

Entangled with its rural character, Basantapur also embraces the modernisation and urbanisation that have spread across Kathmandu's urban core and its peri-urban areas. Within this historic landscape, there are



**Figure 10.** Dabali, Basantapur: temporary night market transforming the public space by fusing rural and urban elements in the same time-space.

evolving and emerging facilities such as bustling markets, commercial hubs, banks, modern cafes and restaurants serving diverse cuisines to locals and tourists, newly built residences, and contemporary boutique shops of traditional handicrafts, clothing, and merchandise. This juxtaposition reflects this HURL's adaptability to changing times and the coexistence of rural and urban characteristics is vividly evident in the local everyday use. It coalesces to produce an enchanting landscape that celebrates the essence of Kathmandu's identity and its living heritage, where traditions persist alongside contemporary influences in the daily lives of its residents. In this coexistence, some residents and shop owners adhere strictly to their traditional cultural practices, while others embrace and practise a cosmopolitan way of life. This dynamic and harmonious blending constructs a diverse community where the old and new, rural and urban intermingle seamlessly. It is precisely this dynamism of ever-evolving social-cultural practices, values, micro-economies, and infrastructure that presents the living tradition from the past into the present time and might also inform the future.

This HURL experienced a physical, psychological, and temporal rupture when the 2015 Gorkha-epicentered earthquake's devastating force left Basantapur, with its many heritage sites, centuries-old temples, palaces, and traditional residential and commercial buildings, in ruins. This catastrophe not only endangered the cultural heritage of Basantapur but also rendered many local residents homeless, commercial users out of business, and other users bereft of social space. In the aftermath of the earthquake, there was an urgent need not only for a comprehensive redevelopment strategy to reestablish the authenticity of Basantapur's cultural heritage and significance, but also to reconstruct its socio-cultural infrastructure. This is because Basantapur is a living heritage site where the socio-cultural and economic systems are deeply woven with its HURL. The socio-cultural system in Basantapur revolves around communal ties and collective identities, which are central to maintaining its living tradition. However, the political situation of Nepal during that period was marked by instability, which went through a period of transition and constitutional reforms. This political uncertainty and bureaucratic hurdles hindered an immediate response to Basantapur's redevelopment, due to delayed decision-making, funding challenges, and competing governmental priorities (Lotter, 2021). This piqued international interest, leading to a collaborative endeavour involving the government of Nepal and the Chinese Academy of Cultural Heritage, alongside other national and international organisations. Consequently, Basantapur has been restored to operational status. However, an imperative now emerges for an anthropological examination that delves into the palpable and intangible dimensions characterising the current operational state of this HURL within the Kathmandu Valley.

The celebrated precinct of Basantapur amidst the vibrant tapestry of Kathmandu, acclaimed for its multifarious architectural aesthetics, is not solely an immutable architectural heritage showcase. Instead, it can be construed as an effervescent urban-rural milieu, where the vestiges of pre-modern tradition and the influx of modern urbanity coalesce harmoniously. The spatio-temporal dynamics and everyday activities of Basantapur reveal its multi-temporal strata in its HURL, adroitly juxtaposing its preserved historical edifices against a set of earthquake-ravaged structures along with those under reconstruction, intermingled with nascent modern constructions. This eclectic concoction of varying structural epochs infuses the locality of Basantapur with such a magnetic energy that attracts everybody including the devotees, merchants, vendors, tourists, artisans, and residents, each actively partaking in diverse activities, thus collectively weaving a placemaking narrative of heritage, resilience, transformation, continuity, perpetuity, and vivacity. However, in contemporary Basantapur, the placemaking narrative is also interlaced with the recurring themes of disaster, development strides, deceptions, authenticity, dislocations, and all in all, time.

## 5. Discussion

The established HUL approach effectively treats urban heritage as a social, cultural, and economic asset for the development of cities—it was not effectively designed to be implemented in historic cities with strong rural connections, often seen in the Global South. Rural-to-urban places tend to have more complex dynamics, which do not easily follow a singular approach but require an embedded approach towards its complexities and multiplicities. While the HUL framework is sensitive towards local community values, its fundamental epistemological system is still dominated by Eurocentric modes, which is not adequate enough to prevent the reduction of the local lifeworld to singularity. There has been local debates on the lack of attention towards the intangible values of heritage in the HUL approach, specifically while implementing it in non-Western contexts (Singh et al., 2020). In the case of Nepal, this disjunction can be noticed from various practices that were implemented before and after the earthquake of 2015. Local people made and sold wood carving products on the ground floor of their premises in their workshops until the earthquake damaged or destroyed these places. Projects such as Parya Sampada, funded by the European Union's SWITCH-Asia Programme, tried to assist the Nepal Government in rebuilding and revitalising the tangible and intangible heritages of Bungamati (Poudel, 2022). However, just rebuilding the buildings might generate more problems than it solves. The locals require a different narrative for their new setting, not only for actively preserving their intangible heritage for achieving sustainable tourism as a long-term goal but for keeping the intangible heritage alive for their own cultural continuity. The continuity of cultural heritage can only be achieved by making the past a part of the future—but making the present a part of the future is also essential (Thurley, 2005). In that regard, even though projects which are designed to support governmental organisations and locals for heritage preservation are important for preserving tangible values, intangible values need a more specific theoretically informed approach which keeps places alive. This is when and where the HURL approach is needed. It provides an alternative framing which is fundamentally based on the present, consisting of components in transition and layering.

## 6. Conclusion

This article proposes a methodological concept and framework to approach to the Global South cities and their transitional historic environment, via an original HURL conceptualisation and framing Kathmandu as a core location. The article promotes a more holistic approach of understanding an evolving city through spatio-temporal systems constructed by, and a lifeworld embedded in, the community's practices, manifested in the HURL not either-or, but both-and urban-rural. This will be foundational to engage in a deeper reading of an interconnected range of places and placemaking practices in Kathmandu at the moment, including but not limited to: the Durbar Square World Heritage Site; traditional temples and courtyards and their associated intangible cultural practices; traditional water-based heritage such as the stone spouts and *Hitis*; historic rural settlements located at the periphery of the Kathmandu core area; public festivals; and the heritage management system of *Guthis*. At another level, the HURL framework and approach contributes to the complex registers and enquiries on the spatio-temporal assemblages to produce Southern places and ways of knowing the non-western world-making in the disciplines of architecture, human geography, urban heritage, and development studies, by theorizing Kathmandu's Basantapur as a transitional core location. Via a similar close reading of their own placemaking through time and the lifeworld constituted and embedded in the placemaking practice, the historic environment of other Southern places can benefit from the HURL framework due to its inherently conflicted nature, and produce new material forms and intensities, in turn enriching its continuous iteration and reiteration towards the



anthropological interpretation and urban transformation of habitable life beyond the Eurocentric tradition and paradigms.

### Acknowledgments

The authors acknowledge the three anonymous reviewers for constructive feedback, Junyang Sun for field support, and the University of Sheffield for funding the open-access publishing of the article.

### Funding

Publication of this article in open access was made possible through the institutional membership agreement between the University of Sheffield and Cogitatio Press.

### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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## About the Authors



**Xiang Ren** (PhD) teaches and researches architectural theory and design at the University of Sheffield's School of Architecture and Landscape, with a particular focus on the endangered built and cultural heritage of the Global East. With Jan Woudstra, he leads the School's research unit *East–West Studies in Architecture and Landscape* from 2018 and co-edited the book *Case Studies in Architecture and Landscape: Expanding the Legacy of Peter Blundell Jones* (Routledge, 2025).



**Sangeeta Singh** (PhD) is a professor in urban planning and has been teaching for more than 27 years at the Institute of Engineering of Tribhuvan University. She was the director of the Centre for Applied Research and Development at the Institute of Engineering, a member of the National Planning Commission in the Government of Nepal in 2023 and 2024, and was involved in the preparation of the 16th National Plan and the 3rd VNR National Report.



**Abhishek Bhutoria** is a Nepali doctoral researcher and a Grantham scholar based at Sheffield. Academically, he has an architecture and urban design background and concurrently built an interest in rural discourses. This interest and curiosity led him to pursue a PhD at the Sheffield School of Architecture and Landscape, focusing on architecture, households, domestic life, socio-cultural processes, and the newly rebuilt Himalayan villages of Nepal.



**Huriye Armağan Doğan** (PhD) is an architect with specialisation in cultural heritage protection and a scientific researcher. Before her full-time scientific occupation, she practised as an architect in Turkey in various restoration projects. She worked at Kaunas University of Technology between 2017–2024. She currently works at the University of Sheffield. Her research interests are adaptive reuse, preservation and perception of cultural heritage, early 20th century architecture, and cultural memory.