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A WALK THROUGH THE WORLD OF IIID AND BEYOND

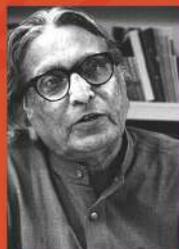
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SEEK | PEEK



A glance through the heritage of Nepal reveals interesting interactions and interrelations in its architecture, art, languages, culture, traditions and lifestyle co-existing in correspondence to the natural surroundings of the place.

TEXT & PHOTOS COURTESY: Roshni Udyavar Yehuda

My first peek at Nepali Architecture was literally through a window – ornate, wooden, enhanced by intricate architraves made of carved bricks – placed on the exterior wall of a modern bungalow, the home of a friend who had invited me to a traditional *Thakali* dinner

during a recent visit to Kathmandu. These windows, part of medieval Newari Architecture, can be seen everywhere, especially in Bhaktapur Square, Patan Durbar Square and Kathmandu Square – three kingdoms of the Malla Dynasty, which ruled in the Kathmandu Valley

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1-2. Windows served the purpose of privacy, light and ventilation and were predominately ornate in the traditional Nepali architecture

3. Sculptures of the King at the Center of the Square indicated their role and significance as custodians of art and culture

until the mid-eighteenth century. My brief stay allowed me to visit only the first two. My guide told me that windows served the purpose of privacy, light and ventilation and were predominately ornate in the chambers where ladies of the Royal Family resided.

Traditional architecture in the Kathmandu valley is rich in craftsmanship and architectural detail. In many ways, there is resemblance to Indian traditional architecture, and in fact, appears to be a continuum of the North Indian Architecture, particularly of the Jammu and Kashmir Valley. Religion and mythology have historically interspersed between the lands in the absence of political boundaries. Hindu and Buddhist philosophy are merged and adopted by the populace as if it were one evolving idea and way of life.

Religion, it seems, is everywhere in this architecture, but with a subtlety such that each form gels with the other in creating a unique urban design. From the temples to the palaces to the pathways, exposed brick and timber flawlessly outline the forms of buildings and streets. Hindu and Buddhist deities are enshrined within a flow of Pagoda and Shikara-



style temples built alongside Palaces.

The role of the King and the royal family in the late medieval art and architecture is undeniable as is their role as protectors of *Dharma*, and custodians and builders of religious shrines. The 55-window Palace (so called for its balcony designed with 55 windows) in Bhaktapur Square, is a masterpiece of craftsmanship. Built by King Jitmitra Malla to house the royal family, it is at the centre of the Square. The Palace, originally finished in 1427, was the official residence of the Royal Family till 1769. Now housing the



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4. 55-window Palace, so called for its balcony designed with 55 windows, in Bhaktapur Square is a masterpiece of craftsmanship

5. Roof-supporting brackets in the form of carved dieties

The windows served the purpose of privacy, light and ventilation and were predominately ornate in the chambers where ladies of the Royal Family resided

National Gallery, and it displays some priceless pieces of art.

One of the striking features of both temple and Palace architecture are roof-supporting brackets made in wood, which are carved in the form of deities or sometimes depict whole stories. At the Patan Darbar square, one of the temples had brackets depicting stories of the nether world – stories of what would happen if you commit sins and are sent to hell.

Public architecture in the Square comprises of water tanks where fresh water from the Bagmati River flowed from gargoyles that are guarded by deities. Like most modern cities though, the rivers supplying water to these tanks have been neglected and water barely trickles through, even as people queue up to collect their daily ration.

The market in both Patan Darbar and Bhaktapur Square start beyond the temples and palaces – and are arranged

organically, much as in a village. Small obscure shops selling everything from ornate silver and antique jewellery to traditional costumes, masks, paintings, sculpture and pottery, lend color to the outskirts of the Squares. The *bazaar* is a tribute to the skills of the locals. The pottery square at Bhaktapur is



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particularly interesting with live display of pottery-making and ceramic artifacts – mostly connected with Lord Buddha.

The traditional vernacular architecture of Nepal is synchronised with its unique landscape and has three distinct styles – architecture of the Himalayan Region (Thakali architecture), the hilly region (Gurung architecture) and the Tarai region or the plains (Mithila architecture). Like vernacular architecture everywhere, the organisation of space within and outside these dwellings is based on deeply evolved ideas and social values related to gender, age, marital customs and other forms of hierarchy within the community as well as more abstract values such as beliefs about privacy. Much in the same way, I learnt, are the languages here – Newari was a literary language and used mainly in urban areas and trading circles in the Kathmandu Valley; Maithili the language of the Tirhut area to the south, still was spoken by many people in the Tarai and Khas bhasha, or the language of the Khasa, is spoken in West Nepal.

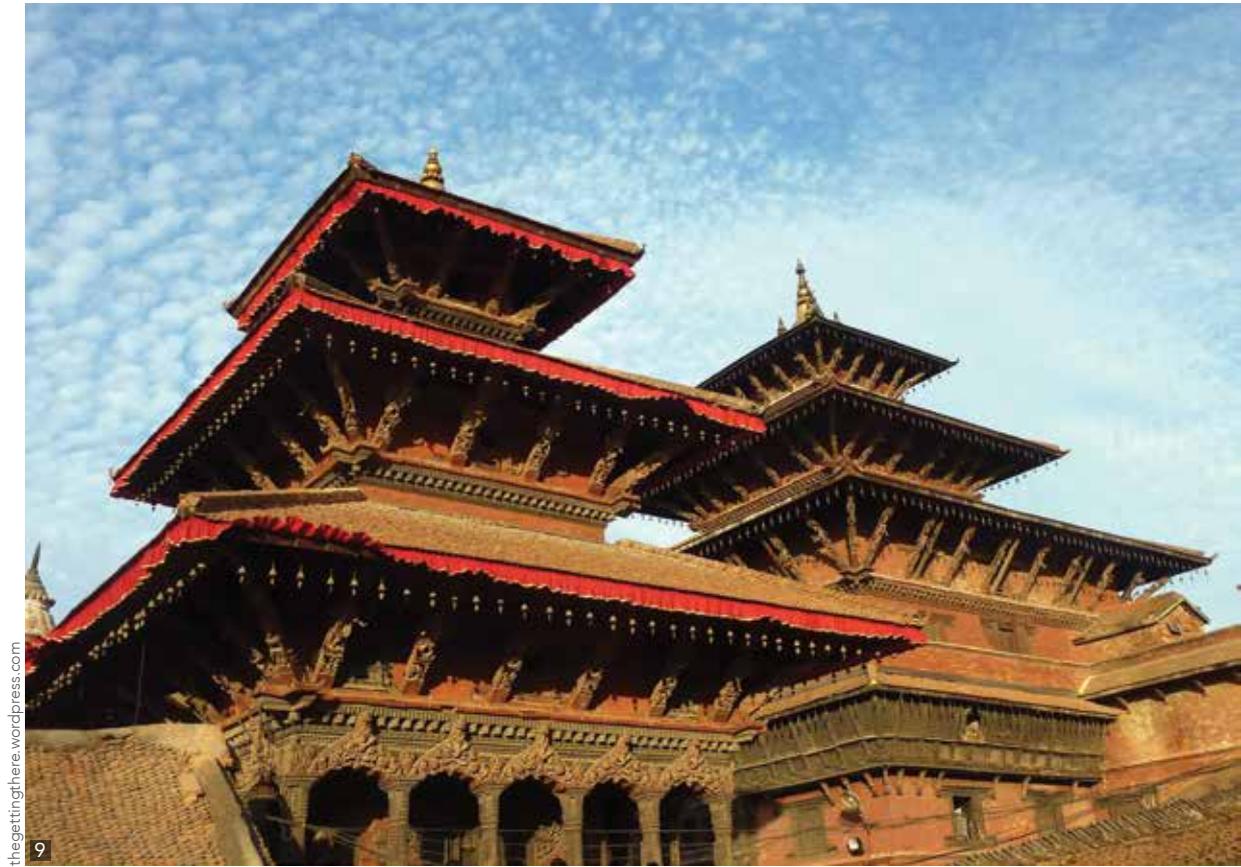
Simplicity, diversity and detailing are the hallmarks of the interior design, which is predominantly based on wood and metal. This ornate work is a dying craft,



fetching the interior artifacts a good sum and is exported around the world in the form of doors, windows, frames and other carvings.

Traditional Nepali homes are known to be aesthetically rich while also being functional. There are still a large number of homes in Newari architecture style with 'darbar style' classical interiors comprising telia-tiled (oil based bricks) flooring, low ceilings and ornate doorways and windows. Traditional homes are also

- 6.** Public water spouts are a common feature in the City Squares
- 7.** The pottery market at Bhaktapur square
- 8.** The markets, in both Patan Darbar and Bhaktapur Square, starting beyond the temples and palaces, are arranged organically



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9. Medieval Newari Architecture, can be seen in Bhaktapur Square, Patan Durbar Square and Kathmandu Square
10. Local artisans on Thangka Paintings

known for the Nepali display of 'kitsch', sentimental items that could be found at almost any variety store in the city. However, newer homes prefer a mix of traditional elements and contemporary settings, seeking a 'neo-classical' exterior and elaborate, cosy, but

functional interiors. While this trend is evident in the Rana or palatial houses, most-middle class houses seem to take on the inverse – traditional exteriors and modern interiors. Modern interiors more often refer to high ceilings (in contrast to traditional homes – more suitable to Nepali climate), use of glass, flooring from Italy and Thailand and furniture from India.

Nepali art and architecture are intriguing as are its people and their culture. There is an underlying sense of wisdom of a people who have lived in close proximity and in harmony with Nature for generations. Two cherished purchases from the visit are a Healing Bowl that speaks through sound (the sound of Om) and a Thangka Painting by a Master Painter (Monk), which gives you a chart of the Universe – the Mandala. ●

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