

## MEANING OF PUBLIC SPACE AND SENSE OF COMMUNITY: The Case of New Neighbourhoods in the Kathmandu Valley

**Rajjan Man Chitrakar**

School of Design, Faculty of Creative Industries  
Queensland University of Technology

Email address: razn77@hotmail.com; rajjan.chitrakar@qut.edu.au

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### Abstract

*This paper examines the meaning of public space and sense of community among neighbourhood residents in the changing urban context of the Kathmandu Valley in Nepal. Two new neighbourhoods were selected for the purpose of this study with data collected from interviews with the residents. The study has found that most residents of the new neighbourhoods have an understanding of the significance of public space in community life. However, such understandings are based less on the actual use of public space. The existing public spaces in these neighbourhoods are less successful in offering a meaning to the residents, due to their poor development and the lack of active use. Despite these changes, some residents believe they have developed a sense of community, which is an outcome of other individual factors than the use of public space. It is argued that the role of contemporary neighbourhood public space in fostering a sense of community appears to be less significant in the valley's present context.*

**Keywords:** *Urban Change; New Neighbourhoods; Meaning of Public Space; Sense of Community; Kathmandu Valley*

### INTRODUCTION

Cities have been in a continual state of transition since their evolution. Over the past century, urban environments around the globe have witnessed a significant level of transformation. Kathmandu Valley, the cultural, economic and political centre of Nepal, has not been immune to the global forces of urban change. Following the political change of 1951, the valley was opened to migration from other parts of the country and exposure to globalisation (Basyal & Khanal, 2001; Shah & Pant, 2005). This created an opportunity for rapid urban growth and subsequent transformation of urban landscape (ICIMOD, UNEP, & Government of Nepal, 2007; Thapa, Murayama, & Ale, 2008). Within a short span of time, the valley has now developed into the largest metropolitan region in the country with a population of over three million people (KMC/World Bank, 2001; Muzzini & Aparicio, 2013).

The contemporary urban growth has had a considerable impact on residential environments of new neighbourhoods in the Kathmandu Valley. The new neighbourhoods exhibit a low density urban sprawl in their physical form, which is in a sharp contrast with the compact and dense settlements of the traditional towns. In addition to the morphological changes, a host of socio - demographic changes can also be observed in the valley's new neighbourhoods. These neighbourhoods are comprised of migrating populations who have moved in from within and outside the valley. The residents are thus newcomers, and the community is essentially multiethnic (Ninglekhu & Rankin, 2009; Subedi, 2010), with an entirely different social milieu as compared to the traditional neighbourhoods (Poudel, 2012).

Another important feature of the current transformation of urban environment in the Kathmandu Valley is the changing provision and use of neighbourhood public space, which has its root in the morphological and social changes of the new neighbourhoods. Scholars argue that

the rapid and uncontrolled urban growth over the past decades has led to the loss of neighbourhood public space, resulting in a low provision of communal meeting areas (see Adhikari, 1998; Chitrakar, Baker, & Guaralda, 2014; KMC/World Bank, 2001; Pradhan, 2003; Shah & Pant, 2005; Shrestha, 2013; Shrestha, 2001). Recent studies confirm such a loss of public space, particularly in the unplanned new neighbourhoods that form a large portion of the valley's current urban growth (Chitrakar, Baker, & Guaralda, 2016). Observations indicate that the residents of most new neighbourhoods find it difficult to find places where they can meet and interact with neighbours; children do not find places to play. The loss of public space thus has had significant consequences on life and activity within urban neighbourhoods (Chitrakar et al., 2014). Some studies also point out at the lost sense of community due to the loss of neighbourhood social life (Shrestha, 2013; Shrestha, 2001).

The meaning of public space is rooted in its provision and use. Abu – Ghazze (1996) explains that public space in urban neighbourhoods have meaning for people as it invites them for use and participation through creating a common platform in its provision. According to Cattell *et al.* (2008), public space is not just a physical setting but it also has a host of subjective meanings for its users that accumulate over time. While the provision and use of public space is changing in new neighbourhoods of the Kathmandu Valley, it remains unclear how such changes have affected residents' perception of contemporary public space and sense of community. This paper attempts to fill this gap in knowledge and examines the meaning of public space and sense of community in the valley's new neighbourhoods in the present changing context. Public space is a broader term that includes a range of venues for social interaction such as open spaces, streets and buildings. However, the focus of this study does not cover streets and other similar venues within urban neighbourhoods.

### **Current provision and use of public space in new neighbourhoods of the Kathmandu Valley**

Overall, there is a severe shortage of public facilities, including open spaces and green areas in new neighbourhoods of the Kathmandu Valley (Adhikari, 1998). According to Pradhan (2003), Kathmandu Metropolitan City (KMC), the largest metropolitan area of the Kathmandu Valley, comprises only 6% of open space (compared to 10 to 20% in other metropolitan regions of the world) with per capita organised open space of 0.97 m<sup>2</sup>. Shrestha (2001, pp. 17-18) observes “a total lack of shared open spaces for social interaction or playground for children”, and finds that the trend of unplanned development of most urban neighbourhoods without open spaces and shared amenities has not only negatively affected the quality of life but also the cultural values of the society. Tiwari (n.d., p. 2) argues that the new neighbourhoods “aggrandises the private spaces and demeans the public ones, and shuns community living”.

While the unplanned new neighbourhoods of the Kathmandu Valley have practically no open spaces (Adhikari, 1998), there are noticeable problems with public spaces in the planned new neighbourhoods, including the gated communities. Shrestha (2005) observes that the planning and design of open spaces in these neighbourhoods are not satisfactory, as their shape and location are inappropriate, and there is an absence of basic amenities to render them user unfriendly. He argues that the amount of open spaces that ranges from 2.5 to 5% of the total developed land area is far less than what is needed to fulfil the needs of the residents, including different age groups. In contrast, the community spaces average about 12% of the built-up area in the traditional urban neighbourhoods (Adhikari, 1998). This indicates that the development of public space has remained poor in both the planned and unplanned new neighbourhoods in terms of the quality and quantity (Chitrakar et al., 2014), with a direct consequence on its use and social life. If public spaces are designed and developed well, so that the physical setting is conducive to life and activity, it can dramatically increase the level of socialisation by combining

necessary, optional and social activities in a common platform (Gehl, 1987). However, this platform is missing in new neighbourhoods of the valley in the present context.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Public space and its meaning in urban neighbourhoods

Public space is “the stage upon which the drama of communal life unfolds” (Carr, Francis, Rivlin, & Stone, 1992, p. 3). Scholars argue that public space at neighbourhood level plays a significant role in people’s everyday life; it is an everyday space of community (Gallacher, 2005). According to Madanipour (2010, p. 107), “public space is intertwined with everyday life in neighbourhoods” in such a way that it is directly related to the quality of day-to-day social life.

Public space concerns not only the physical but also the social and psychological dimensions with a significant overlap among them. The physical dimension refers to the physical environment or “provision” of public space which provides a setting for social interaction, whereas the social dimension refers to the “use” or activities occurring in the space (Carmona, Tiesdell, Heath, & Oc, 2010). The psychological dimension relates to the perception of public space, which may be expressed in terms of how people interpret the space and give “meaning” to it, and how such meaning helps develop a sense of community. The meaning of public space thus has a strong relationship with its physical and social dimensions. Studies have shown that the physical setting of public space can influence its meaning for social interaction and fosters a sense of community (see David, Enric, & David, 2002; Dempsey, 2009; Garcia-Ramon, Ortiz, & Prats, 2004; Peters, 2011).

### Sense of community in urban neighbourhoods

According to Schwirian (1983, p. 84), urban neighbourhoods are “distinguished from a residential area by the degree of social organisation among the residents”. The neighbourhoods have been developed as a means of creating areas of greater social interaction and enhancing neighbourliness and thus, are linked with the notion of community (Gregory, Johnston, Pratt, Watts, & Whatmore, 2011). Rogers *et al.* (2009, p. 326) define sense of community as “the extent to which any member [of a neighbourhood] feels connected to and committed to others in the community, which bears on a sense of security and belonging”. McMillan & Chavis (1986, p. 9) propose four key elements of sense of community: a) membership - a feeling of sense of belonging and emotional safety; b) influence - reflecting ability to change each other in community; c) reinforcement and need fulfilment - suggesting that needs are met through mutual cooperation; and d) shared emotional connection - the sharing of belief and commitments by individuals.

Sense of community is a key psychological construct that the residents of urban neighbourhoods build over a period of time (Nasar & Julian, 1995). It is about a feeling of belonging to the neighbourhood that an individual develops during the period of residence. The length of residence thus becomes important in fostering a sense of community, in addition to neighbourhood association and mutual cooperation. Sense of community is thus also an individual factor (Francis, Giles-Corti, Wood, & Knuiiman, 2012), and the physical design of neighbourhood alone cannot necessarily foster it (Garde, 2011).

### Relationship between meaning of public space and sense of community

Carmona *et al.* (2010) argue that neighbourhood’s socio-cultural character is enhanced in a due course of time through a time-thickened experience, in which there is an important role of social process that includes social interaction and cultural assimilation (Rogers & Sukolratnametee, 2009). Public space facilitates this process in providing an appropriate physical setting. According to Rappoport (2002), neighbourhood does not necessarily involve neighbouring, suggesting that social contact and interaction do not happen in the absence of a common ground. Public space

offers this common ground and facilitates the processes of social exchange and interaction among neighbours.

Public space is thus a meaningful social territory (Abu-Ghazze, 1996), and people give meaning to it for its role in social integration (Peters, 2011). It remains a key design feature of an urban neighbourhood with a potential to offer place attachment. This suggests that the design of physical environment should consider a better provision of public space to encourage social interaction through its use and thus, to build a meaning of place (Abu-Ghazze, 1996, 1999).

The design of the built environment has a direct impact on the development of social relationships. In the context of urban neighbourhoods, studies reveal a strong association between the quality of public space and sense of community (Francis et al., 2012; Kashef, 2009; Lund, 2002; Rogers & Sukolratanametee, 2009; Talen, 2000). This paper maintains that social interaction in public space is one of the significant environmental factors associated with the creation of the sense of community. Such a social process helps neighbourhood residents in acquiring a meaning of public space, which is an outcome of participation and interaction in the physical space over a period of time.

## METHODOLOGY

### Selection of the study areas

The Kathmandu Valley is currently comprised of a diverse urban form. At present, three types of new neighbourhoods can be identified. First, the lack of urban development control has resulted in the spontaneous growth of most urban neighbourhoods, which are largely prevalent throughout the valley. Second, a small number of planned urban neighbourhoods have emerged over the past decades through the efforts of government agencies, utilising Site and Services and Land Pooling or Readjustment schemes. Recently, as an alternative to the unplanned development of new neighbourhoods, private housing companies have developed a number of gated communities in different parts of the valley. The selection of the study areas, therefore, has considered the emerging urban typology, including both planned and unplanned new neighbourhoods, and their contextual features.

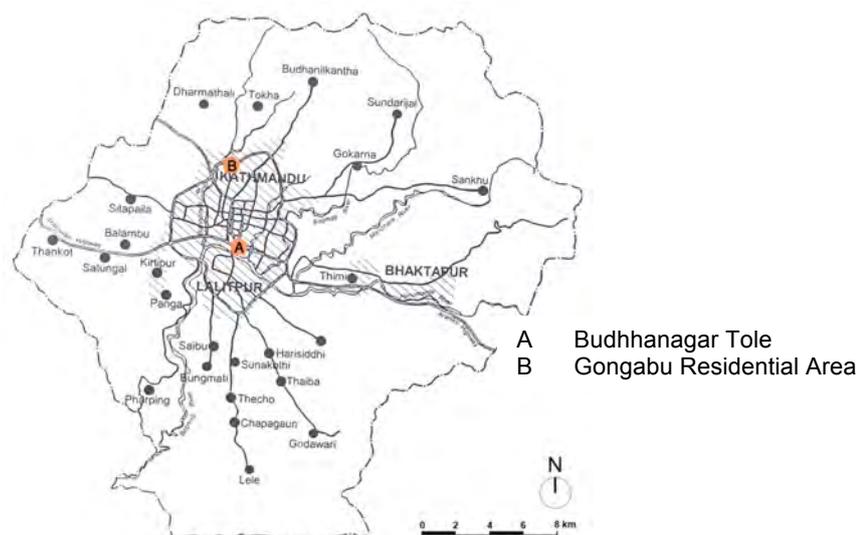


Figure 1. Map of the Kathmandu Valley showing the location of neighbourhoods selected for the study (Source: Modified from KMC/World Bank, 2001)

Two study areas were selected in this study to represent the development of new neighbourhoods that include Budhhanagar Tole<sup>1</sup> (BT) and Gongabu Residential Area (GRA). Figure 1 provides the location of each study area in the Kathmandu Valley. The BT represents an unplanned urban neighbourhood of the valley, whereas the GRA is a planned residential neighbourhood developed by the government using the Land Pooling scheme, with the objective of controlling haphazard urban growth.

### Interviews

Data in this research were collected from face-to-face and in-depth interviews with 23 neighbourhood residents, including key informants, across the two study areas. The key informants were those residents who have been assuming or have assumed an active role in the local community-based organisations. Some of the key informants were the ones who posed in-depth information on the development history of a neighbourhood. These informants were personally approached and asked for the interviews. Snowball sampling was employed to identify other participants. The selection of the interview participants was made to represent different gender, age groups, ethnic backgrounds, occupations and the length of residence so that the sample represents a larger section of the residents. Most interviews were conducted at participants' residences. The interviews remained open-ended and the questions were structured around: a) residents' opinion on the development of public space; b) their understanding of public space and its significance; c) social interaction in public space; and d) the role of public space in developing a sense of community. Interviews were conducted in Nepalese, which were later translated and transcribed into English.

## RESEARCH RESULTS

### Budhhanagar Tole

Located in Ward No.10 of Kathmandu Metropolitan City (KMC), the BT is one of the earliest contemporary urban neighbourhoods in the Kathmandu Valley. The residential development in the BT was initiated in the late 1970s. However, following the pressure of migration to the valley, the past two decades have seen a considerable increase in the pace of neighbourhood growth. At present, the BT has developed into a larger neighbourhood, consisting of approximately 1200 households (see Figure 2).

The BT is comprised of a migrant population with the residents moving in from both within the Kathmandu Valley and other parts of the country. The residents belong to different caste – based ethnic groups, which mainly include *Brahmin*, *Newar* and *Chhetri*. Despite the existing ethnic diversity, the residents have been trying to “organise” themselves within a community. This is evident from the formation of a number of local community-based organisations within the neighbourhood with an aim of managing or improving the residential community. The local residents reveal that the local organisations have taken major initiatives in the development of neighbourhood's physical infrastructure such as roads, water supply and sewerage and street lighting. However, most of these organisations have been inactive for the past few years. As one of the residents explained, this is mainly so because the basic physical development needs of the community have currently been fulfilled, and there is no urgent need to “collaborate” at the moment.

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<sup>1</sup> Tole is a local terminology used to refer to an urban neighbourhood.



Figure 2. Map of the Budhanagr Tole  
 (Source: Modified from the Kathmandu Valley Town Development Committee)

### Opinion on the development of public space

The growth of the BT has been spontaneous due to the lack of planned intervention by government agencies. In such a context, the private land brokers have had a major role in the physical development of the neighbourhood that has led to the poor quality development of public space. Virtually, no public space exists in the BT, except for the streets. A small number of existing public spaces include a few smaller open space pockets located in different parts of the neighbourhood. Some such spaces adjacent to the streets locate smaller temples, whereas others have been left unattended (see Figure 3). The provision of public space is thus unsatisfactory for most residents as evident in the interviews. Most residents expressed their concern over the lack of public space and pointed at a need to have more open space in a close proximity. The residents explained that they find no space for social events or for the children to play. A 57-year-old male resident said:

We don't have [public] space. For morning walk we use the [nearby located] UN Park. There is no other place. We might meet in tea shops with a couple of friends. There is no other way.

The residents of the BT believe that, due to the loss of public space, there is a lack of social contact and “unity” or social harmony among the neighbours, and blame the government for this. The interviews also revealed that while most residents are trying to adjust with the current situation of the loss of public space, a couple of families are trying to move out of the neighbourhood. A 34-year-old male resident explained:

I am moving out [of the BT] as I feel that this area is becoming more congested [with the growing population] as compared to the past. There is no place to meet and chat with people in this area except for some local tea shops and the temples and the UN Park ... There is nothing done by the government regarding [the provision of] public space ... This is so because the BT has been developed in an unplanned manner.



Figure 3. Views of the Budhhanagar Tole (Source: Author, 2014)

### **Perceptions of public space**

The residents value public space although there is a loss of such space in the BT, with a direct impact on neighbourhood social life. Findings from the interviews suggest that the local people usually have an understanding of the significance of public space in community life. A 60-year-old male resident, who has lived in the BT for the last 16 years explained:

Since ancient times, public spaces have been in use for the betterment of all. This shows the importance of public space in the past and throughout many generations. The need for having public space might have been lost in the recent past when I first came to the Kathmandu Valley some 40 years ago. However, over the last two decades, its importance has grown. The value of public space is increasing day by day.

Another interviewee, a 25-year-old female resident stated:

Public space does relate to my life. Because it is the space common to all, I consider it accordingly. I feel public space as my own as I can use it as other people do. I am aware of the benefits of using public space.

The residents of the BT are thus aware of the benefits of using public space and consider it as an important part of their social life. The same resident explained:

I think the use of public space definitely benefits us. I enjoy visiting the parks. I get to worship at the temples. Public space is common to all and we can say that it is ours.

### **Social interaction in public space and sense of community**

Most residents of the BT consider that the use of public space helps in developing social interaction among neighbours despite the fact that they currently have very less opportunity for this. They are also aware that it is important to have public space in the neighbourhood to foster a sense of community. They believe that public space has a potential to be a point of contact among the neighbours, with the benefit of creating a platform for social exchange. A teenager recalled in the interview how his friendship with other local children initiated from playing together

in an open space. Likewise, a 60-year-old male resident explained the social benefits of public space:

The more people come in contact with others, the more they have an opportunity to widen their thoughts with a possibility of a greater social exchange [and interaction]. They would have the chance to share their views with neighbours.

However, the existing situation of public space in the BT does not seem to have a constructive role in the process of socialisation among the neighbours. Most residents indicated that the current level of social interaction is not satisfactory due to the loss of public space and they feel deprived of its potential benefits. A 57-year-old male resident explained:

It would have been much better if we had some public space. The lack of public space has reduced the possibility of meeting among neighbours. People would have spent their leisure time if there was public space. It would have provided a platform for informal chats and discussions, and people could to be more interactive with each others.

Another interviewee, a 60-year-old male resident, said:

People do not tend to be social in the absence of public space and their activities are limited to the internal spaces ... They tend to be individualistic in nature.

Some residents revealed the case of a feeling of isolation among the children due to the lack of physical space for socialisation. An interviewee, a 45-year-old male resident, reported that his son, who is a teenager, has no friends. He further explained:

I wish there was a better provision of public space. Our child is [feeling] isolated due to the lack of public space. He misses going out [of home].

This situation exemplifies a serious psychological consequence of the loss of public space in the BT. Arguably, it is not only the children but most adults may also tend to be introverted in such a situation with an adverse impact on the sense of community. This is more evident in the observation made by the same resident:

Public space is an essential part of life. The lack of this lessens the feeling of attachment to the neighbourhood. The tole is like a family. But it is not so here, due to the lack of common grounds.

### **Gongabu Residential Area**

Spread over an area of 14.2 ha, the GRA is the first planned contemporary urban neighbourhood in the Kathmandu Valley. It is located in the northern peripheral area of the KMC in Ward No. 29 and consists of a total of 406 residential plots. The Land Pooling project for the development of the residential area was introduced by the Kathmandu Valley Town Development Committee (KVTDC) (now, Kathmandu Valley Development Authority) in 1988 and completed in 1996.



Figure 4. Site plan of the Gongabu Residential Area (Source: Modified from KVTDC)

The GRA is a new residential community where the local people have migrated from both within and outside the Kathmandu Valley. The different caste-based ethnic groups in the GRA mainly include *Newar*, *Brahmin*, *Chhetri*, *Gurung*, *Thakali* and *Magar*. Similar to the BT, a number of local community-based organisations are also active within the GRA, with a direct role in the management of the neighbourhood. The local organisations are involved in a range of socio-cultural activities taking place within the community, and thus contribute towards developing social interactions and maintaining social cohesion.

### **Opinion on the development of public space**

Since the GRA is the planned new neighbourhood, a number of plots of varying sizes have been developed as public open spaces (see plots for non-residential purpose in Figure 4). This turns

out to be 4.9% of the total developed area, which is almost twice the actual requirement<sup>2</sup>. Also, there are two community buildings within the neighbourhood with a total floor space of approximately 375 m<sup>2</sup>. The residents have mixed opinions on the development of public space. The development is satisfactory for a few residents as they have found the provision better, when compared to other unplanned new neighbourhoods with no public space. These residents consider that the public spaces are adequate for organising neighbourhood social events. A 46-year-old male resident explained:

Personally, I feel public spaces in the GRA are good and this is why I have chosen this place to live. I think this place is becoming better compared to the time when I first arrived here.

Another resident, a 48-year-old male said:

Some public spaces in the GRA have been leased out to the nursery and a swimming pool. Some are under review in the court [due to encroachment]. However, the provision is better compared to the other places although it is not as good as those found in the planned residential areas of developed countries.



Figure 5. Views of some public spaces in the Gongabu Residential Area (Source: Author, 2014)

Other interviewees, however, expressed their dissatisfaction over the current provision of public space. They feel that most open spaces and the community buildings have been inconveniently located within the neighbourhood and exist in a fragmented way. They find no elements of interest or landscape features within most of these spaces that are necessary to support social life and activity. The residents complained that the open spaces have not been managed properly, but remain largely inaccessible to the public. Because of these factors, they feel that the public spaces are not properly utilised in the GRA and therefore, benefit is not able to be made of them. While a number of open spaces have been put into a private use through long-term leasing arrangements, some residents even had an opinion that it is reasonable to lease out the open spaces if the committee cannot manage them properly. Moreover, some interviewees also feel that there is a lack of maintenance for public spaces because most people do not care for them, including the local organisations (see Figure 5). A 68-year-old male resident said:

Public spaces are more adorable than my own house. It is because my house belongs only to me but public spaces are common to all and all residents have contributed to creating them. But the case is rather opposite at present. No one cares for the public

<sup>2</sup> According to the Building By-laws, 2007, the requirement for open space development (excluding roads) for the project area of more than 5.09 ha is 2.5% of the total land area.

space as they do for their houses. This is happening because we are ignorant. We lack proper education.

### **Perceptions of public space**

Overall, the residents of the GRA have an understanding of the significance of public space in community life. Findings from the interviews suggest that they are aware of the benefits of using public space. As a social being, they consider public space as an important part of their life. A 48-year-old male resident explained:

Public spaces are common to all for the people in the community. These are to be used for social and recreational purposes by the neighbourhood residents ... It makes a difference in one's life if such spaces are not there as there would be no areas for social events. Such spaces should be present in every neighbourhood of the Kathmandu Valley.

Likewise, a 31-year-old female resident explained:

Public space is the place where people could gather for any purpose. Such gathering may not be possible at homes and public space can be used. It is used by all including children and elderly people ... It is required to organise any social event including the public meetings ... We do not have to use the private venues located outside the GRA for such events as we can use the public spaces located inside.

In the same assessment of public space, a teenage girl explained the significance of public space to her neighbourhood life:

It is important as it is the place where social events are organised and allows all people of the society to participate. People come to express their views even if they are your relatives. This is how the community develops.

Giving an example of the major public open space in the GRA, a 34-year-old male resident highlighted the significance of public space:

Let us talk about the public space where we used to organise several social events. I think we have utilised this public space to the fullest and it was the platform to get to know each other. With these public spaces, we are able to organise such programs. It would have been difficult to organise such events on private land ... Public space has helped us a lot.

### **Social interaction in public space and sense of community**

Most residents of the GRA have an opinion that the use of public space helps in developing social interaction among the neighbours. A 46-year-old male resident stated:

It is better to have public space in a neighbourhood ... It can be used for social gathering by all the residents, and this, in turn, allows all of us of to interact with each other and learn new things. I see a huge role of public spaces [in developing social interaction] ... It would have been a disaster if there were no such spaces.

Another interviewee, a 34-year-old male resident explained:

I get to know other people in the community through frequent participation in the social events. In such events, we see a lot of faces and get to introduce each other. You become more familiar when you meet for the second time.

This indicates that the residents in the GRA have been able to know each other by using public space. While the residents use public space for social exchange and interaction, they acquire its meaning over a period of time. A teenage boy explained about his experience:

You can't stay at home all day and you may go to play in a neighbourhood outdoor space with friends. As you visit a place several times, you tend to remember it in future. I

think there is a role of public and playing spaces in the development of a psychological sense [of community].

Developing a meaning of public space is thus a psychological process with most respondents indicating that it is important to have public space and social interaction in building a sense of community. However, at an individual level, the level of social interaction and the resulting sense of community do not appear to be identical in all residents. In addition to the use of public space, the difference in such a psychological process appears to be dependent on the level of involvement in community activities and social events. A 34-year-old male resident, who is actively engaged in the community as an employee of the local organisation explained:

You start to love the place if you have worked for it. People involved in social works would care more for the community and feel more responsible towards it ... I know 97% of the people in the neighbourhood and this is also due to my job within the community.

Some members of the executive committee of the local organisations also expressed similar feelings of belonging to the community, citing the reasons such as the length of residence and the ability to develop social interactions with neighbours.

## DISCUSSION

### Understanding of public space and its significance

This study began with an assumption that the current provision and use of public space, which does not appear to be satisfactory for most residents, might have had negative consequences on its understanding among the residents of new neighbourhoods of the Kathmandu Valley. However, research findings suggest that this is not necessarily the case. Although there is an obvious impact of the loss of public space on the opportunity for socialisation, most residents of both the planned and unplanned new neighbourhoods have an understanding of the significance of public space in the community life. The residents define public space as a common platform for meeting and greeting with neighbours that facilitates the process of social interaction and cultural assimilations (Rogers & Sukolratnametee, 2009). They consider public space as an integral part of their daily life, despite the current unsatisfactory development. Moreover, the residents also identify both the physical and psychological benefits of using public space as they are aware of its roles in promoting physical wellbeing and creating a better social environment. For them, a potential to foster a sense of community is another benefit of using public space with which the physical space could become a meaningful social territory (Abu-Ghazze, 1996).

Findings indicate that the understanding of public space that the residents of new neighbourhoods have acquired are based less on the actual “utilisation” of the existing spaces. In most cases, these appear to be “intuitive and embedded perceptions” that have emerged largely out of past experiences and engagements<sup>3</sup>, and already been acquired before moving into the new neighbourhoods. In other words, such understanding does not reflect a place – based experience of the residents’ present habitation.

### Meaning of public space and sense of community in the changing urban context

Public space is a key physical feature of an urban neighbourhood with a potential to offer a host of subjective meanings (Cattell et al., 2008). However, while the current provision of neighbourhood public space in the Kathmandu Valley has significant impacts on its use, due to the existing drawbacks, the consequences can be noticed in their inability to offer an appropriate meaning for their users. In other words, the existing public spaces are less successful in offering

<sup>3</sup> Several interviewees reported that their previous (parental) places were better in terms of the provision of public space with a comparatively higher level of social interaction. Some explained that the use and observation of public spaces in traditional towns has helped them understand their significance.

a 'new meaning' for the residents in the changing context. None of the interviewees explicitly expressed their attachment towards public spaces in new neighbourhoods.

The lack of development of meaning of public space has had psychological consequences. Findings indicate a relatively poor development of sense of community among neighbourhood residents through the use of public space. In the unplanned new neighbourhoods, the sense of community is almost non-existing, due to the loss of public space and social life, whereas in the planned new neighbourhoods, it is weak and inadequate. This highlights the inherent association between public space and the sense of community (David et al., 2002; Dempsey, 2009; Garcia-Ramon et al., 2004; Peters, 2011), although in the negative sense.

The findings also point out at the development of sense of community among the neighbourhood residents based on the factors other than the actual use of public space. The GRA case highlights this, where the local community-based organisations are relatively more active compared to the unplanned new neighbourhoods. This aligns with previous research findings suggesting that the physical design of neighbourhoods, including public spaces, alone may not foster a sense of community (Garde, 2011). The sense of community among a portion of neighbourhood residents appears to be an outcome of individual factors (Francis et al., 2012) such as the level of involvement in neighbourhood activities, the length of residence and the ability to make friends or neighbours. Those residents who are actively engaged within the community, particularly in the local organisations, have claimed in the interviews that they have developed a better sense of community and a feeling of attachment, regardless of the extent of the use of public space.

## CONCLUSION

Over the past decades, the growth of contemporary urban neighbourhoods in the Kathmandu Valley has seen a considerable level of both morphological and social changes as compared to the traditional neighbourhoods, with a direct impact on the current provision and use of public space. Past studies suggest that the development of public space in new neighbourhoods is not adequate, which is an outcome of rapid and uncontrolled urban growth. As a result, the platform for social interaction is largely missing. Findings of this research confirm such observations as the existing public spaces are not satisfactory for most residents in both the planned and unplanned new neighbourhoods. The findings also indicate that this has had negative consequences on the quality of neighbourhood social life. The residents of new neighbourhoods are largely deprived of the benefits of using public space, and their physical and social wellbeing have been compromised in many cases. Consequently, the meaning of neighbourhood public spaces hardly exist among the neighbourhood residents. Without adequate opportunity to use public space, the level of social interaction among the residents is decreasing, with an adverse impact on the sense of community. All these consequences indicate that sustainability of urban social life may emerge as a major challenge of the current transformation of public space. The satisfactory development of public space in new neighbourhoods and its sustainable use is thus a key concern that demands urgent consideration from all stakeholders. Future urban development policies and plans for the Kathmandu Valley should consider this need and endeavour to develop neighbourhood public space as a critical urban amenity.

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## AUTHOR

### Rajjan Man Chitrakar

*Visiting Fellow*

*School of Design, Creative Industries Faculty*

*Queensland University of Technology,*

*Brisbane, Queensland 4000, Australia*

Email address: [razn77@hotmail.com](mailto:razn77@hotmail.com); [rajjan.chitrakar@qut.edu.au](mailto:rajjan.chitrakar@qut.edu.au)