

Mapping the Kathmandu Valley With Aerial Photographs by Erwin Schneider

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Mapping the Kathmandu Valley With Aerial Photographs by Erwin Schneider

By Neils Gutschow and Hermann Kreutzmann. Kathmandu, Nepal: Himal Books, 2013. 216 pp. US\$ 48.00. ISBN 978-9937-597-06-7.

In Nepalese culture, introspective and critical studies of towns and cities are rare, sometimes even considered ahistorical and atraditional. This is partly attributed to the oral tradition of maintaining history, which allows little opportunity for reflection. History is recorded in songs and chants, myths, and legends, but rarely in maps and writings. Most critical studies on Nepal or Kathmandu are therefore initiated and elicited by passionate overseas scholars (Hosken 1974; Hagen 1980; Müller 1981; Haaland 1982; Slusser 1982; Levy 1990; Aranha 1991), including Gutschow and Kreutzmann. The authors of this book need no introduction in Nepalese studies, given that their theoretical and empirical contribution has been profound. However, this book has a different significance. It presents aerial images of the Kathmandu Valley and maps generated from them at the scale of 1:50,000 and 1:10,000, still known today as Schneider's maps. These maps are a product of an interdisciplinary work involving an assemblage of experts—anthropologists, cartographers, geologists, geographers, a Tibetologist, and many others—and are therefore a valuable resource to urban scholarship. The book is a historical record that the city will treasure for a long time.

Kathmandu is a unique city, not only because of its urban landscape set in a mountain basin with intense agricultural use, but also for the urban culture that has helped to produce distinctive architecture and

built form. Whether it is the mysticism of Mandala, or the societal hierarchical structure, space plays a crucial role. In that sense, the culture is inseparable from the geography it is set in. The complex geological conditions, frequent earthquakes—including the one on 25 April 2015—and their ramifications on culture underscore this point. The book captures both dimensions, giving readers an opportunity to grasp the whole. What is also unique about Kathmandu is that the city entered the modern era after centuries of medieval culture, completely bypassing what Mumford (1938) calls the “paleotechnic age”—in other words, the industrial era. This rapid progression of medieval or preindustrial to modern has produced an apparent discordance with tradition and culture. The transition, which occurred in the matter of few decades, is very rarely captured as eloquently as in this book.

The core purpose of the book remains the introduction of Erwin Schneider's remarkable work on Kathmandu. Schneider was not only a mountaineer but also a legendary cartographer engaged in mapping Everest. In 1971 to 1972 he made an aerial survey of the city and used these photographs to make detailed maps. These had remained hidden until found by the authors and published in this book in the context of map-making. It is indeed a cartographer's dream to make a perfect map that captures the complex dimensions associated with the place. The book combines unique black-and-white photographs with the maps made using them and will stay in Nepalese annals as one of the most valuable contributions of the 20th century. For those engaged in urban and cultural studies, these maps are immensely useful as one of the most authoritative accounts of Kathmandu's cartographic history. On closer reading, they not only evoke a nostalgic conclusion about a superfluous and forgotten discipline, but also show how much Nepal's capital has

changed from an intensively cultivated Himalayan valley into a highly disorganized urban sprawl.

As a fitting companion to Schneider's photographs, Gutschow and Kreutzmann provide a brief and breezy commentary of Kathmandu's transition through history. The process of deciphering city plans and histories follows the same method as that of modern science—a laboratory where everything can be decomposed and again composed. The authors take a similar approach. They decompose the various strands of the city before stitching them together to portray a broader picture against which the reader will be looking at Schneider's photographs. This narrative is presented in 3 different ways: a geological and morphological account of the city, a historical account of town planning in Kathmandu, and a section of maps from early years. Despite its brevity, the narrative is sharp enough to let readers glide through one of the most transformative periods the city has experienced. To explain these changes, the authors take account of broader forces of urbanization, migration, and globalization. These mainly refer to the replacement of large areas of cultivation, including fields and fallows, rivers, and lakes, by roads and infrastructure and commercialized, commodified building activities, not always in the same order. The historical account takes readers through the progression from ancient, medieval, to Rana and the current period of Kathmandu's history. The book portrays Kathmandu resembling our contemporary sense of space, where the loss of dimensional mechanics of medieval geometry has been profound.

The authors' keenness to create a formidable body of evidence to capture the recent urban growth makes this book even more special. Starting with the surprisingly accurate first known map of “Nepaul” by Charles Crawford dated 1802 and the work of the first Nepali map-maker,

Chandra Pandey, in 1873, the authors go on to include Sylvan Levy (1905) and Perceval Landon (1927). Later maps are extremely valuable tools in urban planning, even though they are rarely used by the government in its spatial planning.

The book is not just about documentary evidence; it is also about stirring contemporary debate on town planning issues. On page 20, the authors ask: “Is Kathmandu a megacity?” While the city resembles nothing like Sassen’s (2001) Global City or a “megacity,” its urban footprint, central orientation, symbolism, population density, and transport issues lead the authors to conclude that Kathmandu is a metropolis of supranational importance. They go on to debate competing models of development, whether it is a linear city along the outer ring road of cluster subcities (p 36), and the dreams of modernity that stay alive with high-rises, flyovers, shopping centers, and so on (p 39). However, they refrain from

providing a long analysis that would lose its relevance in its own details. Instead, they let readers explore for themselves, offering “sound bites” that provide the shoots of new knowledge for urban planners in Kathmandu.

The book is a definitive collection of evidence, extremely valuable to capture the city’s growth and transition from historical to modern and should be treasured by all, whether or not the reader is interested in urban and planning studies. As a native of Kathmandu as well as someone engaged in critical urban studies, I am reminded that the transition occurring in the city is an evolving labyrinth of urban sorrow, which is almost irreversible. The success of the book can be judged simply by the emotion it evokes in all those concerned.

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