Martina Maria Francesca Cerra


Dashain
*New civic places for a society in transformation*



4407962

Explore Lab 21

On September 16th, Nepal signed its new constitution, which, among others articles, claims the federalization of the country, makes the nation secular and allows freedom of expression.

This event represents a milestone and a glimpse of hope after decades of internal political instability and uncertain administrations, which even led to ten years of civil war. These sociopolitical dynamics have been reflected mainly in the capital, Kathmandu, that is the main political-administrative center and an economically strategic location, becoming one of the fastest-growing metropolitan areas in the South Asian region, thus forcing the country to confront an unprecedented challenge of rapid urbanization and modernization on a metropolitan scale. The aim of this graduation research is to understand how urbanism and the public realm had been affected by these implications in the past and how could they be influenced by this revolution; tackling a sociopolitical topic with the apparatus of architecture.

The research methodology included an analysis of the city through different topics such as influences, history, public space, architecture typologies and urbanism. Although this could seem an excessively broad analysis, this helped me to understand, what I wanted to focus on. Moreover, a three weeks fieldwork trip between September and October 2015 had been a crucial part of the research, where architecture teachers, members of institutions had been interviewed. The trip contributed to developing a deeper understanding of the object of study and led to formulate several questions:

- How this new chapter of Nepal history will affect the built environment of Kathmandu?
- If architecture reflects its society, and society shapes architecture, what is the shape of the architecture of the crisis years? And what it should be the shape of the new architecture?
- Which are the new needs of the citizens that can be accommodated by architecture elements?
- How could it answer also to needs deeply rooted in the city?
- Is there a way to develop a project which could be a positive contribution to the city, giving a rational shape to a vernacular architecture?

Once formulated the questions the research was able to take a more specific direction that is the relationship between these political implications and architecture.

This direction was taking in account many parts of the previous collection of information selecting the most relevant for this new specific topic.

This included a relationship of the shapes, scales, and uses of the public realm over the centuries under each political dominations.

Indeed, from the Fifth Century to the Fifteenth, over the two long-lasting kingdoms Kathmandu had, the development of the public space followed a very linear development, evolving through a hierarchy, a scale, of commonality. This was starting from the most intimate space, the courtyard - although it could be classified as a semipublic space, it represented to all intents and purposes a small square accessible to everyone-, to the main square (the palace square), going through the neighborhood square -that had to have the structure of an open courtyard- to the market square -which was formed by the intersection of different streets-. This was not only a scale of publicness, but also of accessibility, enclosure, and size; the

urban design and the interrelationship of streets and open spaces showed a great understanding of visual and functional principles. Unfortunately, this configuration of public space was not pursued during the following domination and, later on, through the dictatorship and the civil war; indeed, there had been a regression of the public realm which took place through privatization and unplanned urbanization, leading to the actual situation where the scale of publicness as it was known four centuries ago it is not recognizable anymore, and the public life is lived either within private dwelling, or at the corner of the street, on the step of a staircase, or in a cafe.

This relationship was also compared with the rapid and unplanned growth of the city during the last twenty-five years, which, as well, jeopardized the public realm, either swallowing up the spaces meant for the collectivity or not taking into consideration the creation of the latter in the newly built-up areas. In fact, the urban growth brought to two consequences: in the historic center, the squares designed during the Medieval Age had been progressively occupied by new buildings or being transformed in traffic circles- subjugating to the always more predominant flow of cars which invaded the city- and, in the more peripheral areas, the expansion had been only guided by the extension of the urban facilities such as electricity and drinking water, leading to the consequence that these new areas are easily recognizable because composed by detached houses lacking any public space meant for the collectivity.

If till the Seventeenth Century the urban design showed great feeling for and understanding of visual and functional principles with also a coherence between the settlements around the main city -which made it be a Social City as the one theorized by Howard- with the recent urbanization there is almost no more trace of it.

The project, as the word itself says, it is a projection of how could be the future of this city in transformation according to the events of the immediate present. Of course the goal of this project is not to solve all the problems of the city, nor it is conceived just as a means to an end, in fact, as stated by Aureli, *architecture as knowledge is seen as a strategic device through which the forces at stake in the development of the city are made visible; it is exactly when these forces become critically understandable that the architectural project is no longer just a means to an end, but also a possibility for disentangling the means from their presuppose ends towards an alternative project for the city.*

The project has a political value, since the roots of the political instability arise from the lack of integration of different ethnic groups in the political dynamics and, at the same time, has a communal value, to respond to the almost total absence of public spaces. These two elements merge in the design of civic places, which are what the city need the most and act on three different scales: the urban block, the district, and the nation. The three scales of interventions has also been influenced by the history of the city, keeping in mind the ancient hierarchy of the public spaces and identifying the three places, the courtyard, the market crossroad and the main square as three places of different exchange which could be later on translated in three civic thematic: the courtyard as place of social exchange, the market crossroad as place of economic exchange and, Finally, the main square as place of politic exchange. Moreover, these three projects, are not meant to be as independent and autonomous organisms in themselves, but to (re) activate the space around them generating public realm not only within the building but overall outside.

For this purpose, a urban strategy taking over the whole city on all the scales had been developed. This strategy concerned having pavilions within the urban blocks of the historic center, in order to recreate the primordial conditions of the most familiar public space within the courtyards in spaces that are unused, or used as parking spaces and open dump; moreover, the pavilions are placed at the inner edges of the jagged buildings, which could give also a sense of order in these spaces of result, indeed, as previously mentioned, in this townscape there is also a need of rationality because of a total absence of logic and rules. These pavilions had been the part of the project more focused: indeed, although the project, meant as strategy,

covers different architectural building, focusing on the smaller scale felt the closest part to the current needs of the citizens, recreating a domestic public space that could host different activities and could regenerate the life outside the buildings. In order to achieve the goal, a low-tech pavilion, in order to built by the inhabitants themselves, had been developed in a way to be mutable according to the needs of the people living in a specific courtyard. Although the pavilion had been thought with four possible different infilling in order to arrange four different common needs, it had been kept in mind the vernacular mentality of this population, leaving to the user himself the possibility of personalize or change or interchange the pavilion with another. Furthermore, these pavilions had been thought and consequentially designed to be extremely specific for the population of Kathmandu, analyzing habits, uses, dimensions, movements familiar to the local citizens.

With regard to the intermediate scale, the project provides a forum, as the roman one, as a political place and place of commerce: in fact this project incorporates a civic center to allow political association to discuss and debate and a business incubator to favor the economic implications and consequences of the secularity of the country. This intermediate scale of the project would act as response to the need of capillarity of the city, so as urban, social, and political connector between the core of the city and the urban peripheries; indeed, as stated by Rossi, the new primary elements of these areas are commercial, cultural and public institutions, *new monuments of the expanding urban territory*.

Finally, the third project represents the largest scale, the nation. It provides the new national assembly since now Nepal will become a country with a lower and higher house. Keeping in mind that all power comes from the people, parliament buildings are both instruments and monuments of this idea: inside they are places of debate, on the outside, they represent the power of nations. This, on contrary to the past, will be done avoiding that architectural pomposity and rhetoric which had been characterizing the Nepali parliaments in the last 60 years; indeed, as in the past their parliaments were out of scale, in comparison with the environment, to show a power they did not really have, the new national assembly, which holds its power into the citizens, could allow itself to be a very simple building and yet being extremely powerful. Moreover, this project, as the institutional building par excellence, has to face the challenge to represent the Nepali people as a whole, being something that everyone is able to recognize themselves in, but at the same time keeping in mind the different identities embed in the country.

The three projects stand as stages of social life in Kathmandu and tackle the city from three points of view of the urban reality: the political, the economic, and the social. Together, they create the physical base for something bigger and abstract that is the cultural regeneration of a whole country and are tools to restore redefine and reactivate the existing urban space.