

abstract for proposed paper

*Happiness and Architecture:
the traditional and the new*

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Over the centuries, writers and philosophers have been trying to find the right words to explain what happiness is and so far they have not succeeded. Similarly, there have been countless attempts to systematically dissect the term love and other emotions like joy, hate, etc. Thus, this paper will not attempt to define something that many of my much more esteemed predecessors have not had the good fortune in doing. However, to be able to address the concept of the Gross National Happiness and its relationship to other ideas, it is important to set some boundaries to the term happiness. Accordingly, an assumption is made that happiness is not only something that one strives for as the end result, but, furthermore, it is a concept that relates to the very process of life and living itself – we might spend our lifetime searching for happiness, while not noticing the fact that it is in our hands to make our entire lives happy. It is not to negate the importance to continuity and the end goal of achieving the happiness (or an attempt to strive towards it), however it has to be realized that the goal is very much related to the path that is taken to get there.

Instead of attempting to find an answer to what happiness is and what the certain ways to achieve it are, this paper will look at the role that architecture plays in this process and, in particular, what place it occupies in the unique social, political, religious, and economical setting provided by the stunning people, nature, and beliefs currently existing in Bhutan. First, paper will briefly look at the general background of architecture outlining what the main influences have been in the process of its development. Consequently, connection between the general dialectics of this field and the architecture existing in Bhutan will be discussed. This connection takes into account the historical approaches to the subject and the distinctive incarnations of it in the architecture of Bhutan. And, finally, a conversation will be introduced on the role that architecture plays in the larger concept of the Gross National Happiness.

Like *gho* and *kira*, architecture is what surrounds and envelopes us – it is the external environment which we live in and that sets an important backdrop to what we are and what we do. As seen from virtually any country of this world, it very much reflects the values existing in the society. An example of this can be seen when looking at the current Dutch architecture that, like its society, is one of the most deliberately liberal and adventurous backdrops to the human interaction ever created. The same can also be seen in cities like New York that strives on dynamism very actively demonstrating that it is one of the financial centers of the world and that it is ruled by economic values and individual-centered achievements. Conversely, the architecture of Bhutan, as revealed both on the main streets of Thimphu, as well as in the more remote villages like Ura, radiates the traditional roots of its origin. In the past, country has heavily relied on mud, stone, clay, and timber structures that were made to reflect the architectural tradition of dzongs introduced in the 12th century.

However, the technical aspect of building, arguably, is not as important as the symbolic value that is carried out by each particular building. Dzongs and temples, chortens and monasteries – all have very special places in the Bhutanese architecture and daily life that is more significant than just their structure or look. The meaning is rooted in the society and centuries of traditions that have been passed down from generation to generation; as such, tradition in Bhutan is very close to the new architecture created by firms like Morphosis and Asymptote who are approaching each design problem from the philosophical aspects attempting to find new answers and solutions to social, spatial, and other questions. Arguably, architecture of Bhutan and the thought process behind it are not only traditional, but also advanced in that they take into account many questions and many answers that current architects are dealing with.

Thus, while consideration of details and building methods is an important aspect of a complete analysis comparing different types of architecture, this paper is more interested in the broader

issue of architecture and its different modes of manifestation. For example, from the simple hut of the hunter-gatherer that at times is seen as the origin of the modern architecture (one could argue that the early forms of dwellings like the appropriation of caves precedes the simple hut, however, it will not be looked at as origin of architecture, since it was not a human construct – it was, to large extent, an appropriation of a form already existing in nature), our building practices have developed through centuries to find ever new and innovative modes of design that would increase the comfort of human beings. Nevertheless, most societies that have existed before us, and the ones that exist today, also put a certain *zeitgeist* stamp on the building practices. As shown earlier, it is very much present in both the Dutch and the Bhutanese architecture.

When looking at the simple hut, it was the most basic dwelling for a group of people to shield them from the elements of nature. However, as the construction developed and societies changed, it started to demonstrate more eloquence in the messages that it carried. An example of this can be seen in the Roman architecture that can be observed to this day – the capitols of the temples and other buildings resonate the power and ability of the rulers of that time. In addition to carrying implicit message or demonstrating the might and power of the state, they also carry explicit messages on their façades consisting of text honoring the rulers, the society, and the inherent values of the system when those structures were erected. From the days of ancient Rome and Greece, many subsequent states have followed this practice of creating architecture that “speaks” and, thus delivers messages reinforcing the certain point of view. This “speaking” can also be seen today when, even if not as explicit as actual writing on the wall (while this also at times can be encountered), messages are delivered through architecture. An example of this can be seen when looking at the project that is to be realized in the place of the destroyed World Trade Centre in New York City – it is to show that the USA is as strong as ever and will never bow to any other power. Thus, it will be as impressive as the building that stood on the given site before.

The language of the buildings encountered in Bhutan is also extremely relevant. In fact, it could be argued that architecture is linked to the societal structure closer than anywhere else in the world. In *Introduction to Traditional Architecture of Bhutan*, very specific guidelines are given for what design elements can and should be used in what types of buildings as the basis using the dzong architecture. Thus, the design of structures very specifically tells the story of what each building is and there is no confusion as to what activities each of them contain – that can be determined by simply looking at the particular cornices, paint color, roof structure, doors, windows, and countless other elements. As a result, architecture in Bhutan does not only constitute an inhabitable space, but also is a medium expressing the social, religious, and, arguably, economic connections in the society while, additionally, also very directly embodies the tradition by implementing it in virtually every new building. This immediate link and symbolism placed in architecture, sets Bhutan apart from the other countries. For example, a condition encountered in Bilbao, Spain, where older, turn of 19th and 20th centuries’ buildings coexist with the ultra-modern Guggenheim Museum designed by Frank Gehry, would not be created in Bhutan where the traditional structures exist as a background to centuries old landscape and societal linkages.

In other countries where the link between the society and architecture is not as explicit and apparent as it is in Bhutan, architecture, while constituting environment where people operate in, with some exceptions, does not act to promote or advance the policies and aspirations of the development of the country. In Bhutan, however, where national dress is customary when going to work, when going for shopping, or being in public in other way, where monarchy is still very strong despite the large attention and power given to the National Assembly, and where

Buddhism is not only a religion, but a general lifestyle, architecture has a significantly more important role to play.

This is the part of the paper that turns to the connection between the architecture and the concept of the Gross National Happiness. Because, as described above, architecture plays a very particular and specific role in Bhutan that is very different from any other country, it also has a lot of importance when it comes to promoting (or, conversely impeding) the policies designed to assist the development of the country based on the ideals as they are currently set forth in the development strategies. For example, introduction of non-native materials into Bhutanese architecture, similarly to introduction of new styles of clothing, television, mobile phones, and all other influences, will have a certain impact on the lifestyles of Bhutanese people and the larger direction of development of the country. The question is not whether this change is for better or worse, but rather what are the exact impacts that the changing of the environment where we live in mean in the larger process of movement towards increasing the Gross National Happiness and how to improve on these impacts. Taking it one step further, maybe this change of the environment can effectively be used to further advance the Bhutanese development model.

Similarly to how the introduction of other external conditions (like television), have changed the dynamics of the Bhutanese lifestyle, so will introduction of new architecture. The extent is difficult to predict because it very much depends on the nature how newer buildings are being introduced. So far, while some of the new resorts built in Paro and Phobjikha valleys as well as possibly some other buildings that I am not too familiar with yet, slightly deviate from the very traditional approaches not only in the construction techniques, but also in their overall design and look, most of the structures being constructed in Bhutan very closely follow the rules and regulations set out by the Department of Urban Development and Housing.

Despite the change and despite the inevitability of the new being introduced into the country, I argue that it is possible to initiate new forms and new carriers of messages that are as strong as the traditional ones. Here I do not mean that new temples are to be built or that dzongs are to be abandoned for new glass towers as seen around the world. On the contrary – I believe that tradition is an extremely important part of who we are and that it is one of the factors that characterizes Bhutan and allows for a concept like the Gross National Happiness to actually be discussed. However, I do propose that new buildings and new ideas can become a part of what Bhutan is not only not compromising the traditional value systems and challenging them, but effectively complementing them and carrying message that Bhutan is unique in its approach to development not only by relaying on the rich cultural and historical heritage, but by introducing new concepts that are very much in harmony with the tradition. Gross National Happiness is one of such new introductions that are very characteristic of Bhutan. There is no reason that all the other aspects that constitute modern day Bhutan, including architecture, could not be as important and innovative as the Gross National Happiness.