Transformation in the Traditional Himalayan Landscape: The Rise of the Trekking Hotel in Nepal

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This article explores the role of tourism development in cultural persistence in the Nepal Himalayas. It documents recent transformations in the material landscape in the context of the burgeoning number of new “trekker” hotels. It suggests that despite the ostensible newness of such hotels as a typology, and despite their having resulted from the phenomenon of global tourism, their morphology is entirely local. As such, they may be seen as the product of individual invention and local creativity.

In May of 1995 I found myself in a dusty town toward the western end of a valley high in the Nepal Himalayas. Situated at 11,614 feet, Manang is an eight-day walk from the nearest vehicular transportation and the last major stop on the Annapurna circuit before Thorung La, a 17,769-foot mountain pass between the Manang and Kali Gandaki valleys. My privilege, as a bideshi (foreigner) who could speak Nepali, was to be invited to the bedroom of the proprietor of the Manaslu Guest House for a late-night screening on his most prized possession.

The shiny factory stickers were still affixed to the TV and VCR in a futile attempt to preserve their newness as we sat down to watch Jindaar, the latest action film from Bollywood — or at least the latest to make it to this supposedly “backward” corner of Nepal. Barely audible in the distance was the high-pitched chirp of the generator that “fueled” our media madness. Approximately ten of us were crowded into the bedroom: the proprietor, his wife, his three children, myself, my colleague Cesar (a Colombian often mistaken for a mute Nepali because of his features, dark complexion, and relative ineptitude at the language), and a handful of porters attempting to escape, if for only a moment, the constant nagging of their respective sahibs (bosses). It mattered little that few, if any, of us understood Hindi. The plot of the film was typical: two heroes (one “good,” one “bad”) were attempting to rescue a woman (their shared love) from a villain.
Four short years later, when I returned to Manang in September 1999, “video night” had become a regular commercial enterprise. But the cost of admission to the evening’s offering, Eyes Wide Shut, was 40 Rns, a sum equivalent to the cost of my bed for the evening. At that time, I joined twenty or so trekkers crammed onto makeshift bleachers in a tiny video hall in what had once been the house stable. The irony that we had become a better source of income and prestige than the family’s yaks was most certainly lost on my compatriots. After all, where better to see Hollywood’s famous (ex) couple, Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman, get it on than in a former stable at 12,000 feet in the shadow of the world’s tallest mountains, a week’s walk from “civilization”? Such is the current state of trekking in the Himalayas, where amenity has quickly become the main marketing tool, and where the “distance” between here and there is closing. Or is it?

The trajectories of development in the Nepal Himalayas reflect a complicated mix of local and global factors, and the video hall as a commercial enterprise is but one of many recent innovations. Yet, while the ubiquity of this and other hybrid cultural manifestations is no doubt significant, more profound, yet subtle, are the transformations taking place in local building practices. In fact, so-called “traditional” building practices are now in a profound state of flux, as construction is increasingly viewed as a means for improving the local quality of life in line with evolving trajectories of cultural understanding and shifts in the local micro-economy. The forces engaged in this development drama are many and varied: they include transnational tourists and their concomitant apparatus, national and international policies and organizations, geopolitical and economic pressures, and local entrepreneurs. In this article I will try to bring some of these dynamics to light, and show how development “happens,” sanctioned or not, in ways that often run counter to what logic would predict. In real-world contexts, policy is often only one component in a larger, more complex cultural negotiation characterized by a high degree of local agency.

As will be demonstrated, the case of Nepal problematizes the notion of “tourism as imperialism” championed by Dennison Nash. Instead of representing the unwitting or unwelcome complicity of “local” populations engaged in economic exchange (at the mercy of a largely Western — and consequently imperial — tourism apparatus), I will show how such transformations as the mountain hotel constitute a kind of “imagination.” I take my sense of this word from the writings of Arjun Appadurai. Particularly, in Modernity at Large, he proposed a new conception of the agency of cultural production:

The image, the imagined, the imaginary — these cultural terms . . . direct us to something critical and new in global cultural processes: the imagination as a social practice.

No longer mere fantasy (opium for the masses whose real work is elsewhere), no longer simple escape (from a world defined principally by more concrete structures), no longer elite pastime (thus not relevant to the lives of ordinary people), and no longer mere contemplation (irrelevant for new forms of desire and subjectivity), the imagination has become an organized field of social practices, a form of work (in the sense of both labor and culturally organized practice, and a form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility . . . . The imagination is now central to all forms of agency, is itself a social fact, and is the key component of the new global order.

Appadurai has described such “imagination as social practice” as part of an updated “Modernization Theory,” where previous concern for the loss of “culture” and the need to “preserve” and “salvage” cultures is noticeably absent. Indeed, “culture” has become “cultural,” an adjective indicating its “contextual, heuristic, and comparative dimension [which] orients us to the idea of culture as difference.”

Appadurai’s notion of imagination is, of course, predicated on the divide between modern technologies of travel and the cultural practices of what Nelson Graburn has called “fourth-world” peoples. However (as will become evident below), the Himalayas, while only recently emerging as an international tourist destination, have long been a space of travel, trade and pilgrimage. The typically Buddhist peoples who inhabit these regions are also a minority in a predominantly Hindu country. Consequently, any conception of these sites as previously bounded or culturally static may be challenged by a longstanding proclivity among the inhabitants toward such “imaginations” as proposed by Appadurai.

In general, the intersection of these imaginations and the traditional landscape is my subject here, as I focus on one “hotel” in particular as a site of transformation within the broader context of Himalayan tourism development.

RECENT HISTORY OF THE HIMALAYAS

Before the eighteenth century, “Nepal” was the name of the rich fertile central valley inhabited by the three Malla kingdoms of Kathmandu, Bhaktapur, and Patan. The surrounding areas could be characterized politically as being comprised of loosely organized petty kingdoms and regions of tribal control. In 1768 Prithvi Narayan Shah conquered the Nepal valley (now the greater Kathmandu area) and endeavored to unify what is today known as Nepal. In 1774 Shah described his newly consolidated land as a “garden” in which all castes, groups and peoples lived together in harmony and peace (FIG. 1). The remark reflected the fact that then, as now, the cultural diversity of Nepal is marked: it consists today of 63 recognized castes and ethnicities. But in 2002 the political landscape and state of affairs could hardly be characterized as “garden-like.” Civil war and political intrigue are now rampant in Nepal, even if a few high-mountain areas have so far remained relatively isolated from such turmoil.
For centuries the Himalayas have been home to a patchwork of ethnic minorities with varying degrees of Tibetan descent. Yet despite being Buddhists, Bhotiyas (the Nepali term for peoples of Tibetan descent) have experienced little persecution. Though ruled by a Hindu monarchy, Nepal has a particularly unorthodox caste structure. And because the Terai (Nepal’s lowland area) is considered the birthplace of Buddha, and because the earliest kingdoms of the Kathmandu valley were generally recognized as Buddhist, the Hindu monarchy can be understood as a relatively recent phenomenon. Indeed, in many of Nepal’s highland valleys petty kingdoms were more likely to have paid allegiance to the lamaist theocracy in Tibet, and to varying degrees to the Dalai Lama. And since these petty kingdoms administered the salt trade between Tibet and India, many were quite powerful and influential in their own right.

Therefore, despite annual migrations to the more temperate hill areas during the winter months, the life of the mountain people of Nepal remained relatively unaffected by royal machinations in Kathmandu. The mountains not only served as a de facto defensive buffer, but they remained relatively worthless to lowland Hindu regimes whose economies were based on agriculture. This meant the Bhotiya people largely escaped the exploitative practices of upper-caste Hindus in other parts of Nepal, which often included expropriation of land and concomitant indentured servitude. (Such practices have been particularly common with regard to “untouchables” in the lower valleys and the Terai.) And even when the peoples of the higher Himalayan valleys did come under the political domination of the Shah kings and Kathmandu, the degree of outside control over their affairs was often commensurate with their relative exposure and accessibility.

Such a pattern of relative independence was dealt a severe blow by India’s decision to begin commercial production of iodized salt in the early twentieth century. A second major blow came when Tibet’s borders were closed due to Chinese occupation in 1959. As a result, many of the mountain economies faltered severely in the mid-twentieth century. In fact, since many high valleys were not self-sufficient in the production of food, without exchange earnings to augment their subsistence, even the continued inhabitation of some areas became problematic. It was within such a historic context that certain communities welcomed first mountaineering, and later commercial tourism, as an alternative source of income. In others areas of Nepal, however, poverty, and more recently, civil unrest, have become the norm.

TOURISM IN NEPAL: THE RISE OF TREKKING

As mentioned above, tourism in Nepal has its roots in mountaineering. Until the 1950s, the remote Hindu kingdom was closed to Westerners. This meant that early expeditions to Mount Everest were forced to set out from Darjeeling in India, traverse great distances through Tibet, and make their summit attempts from the north. However, the revolution in China, China’s annexation of Tibet, and the subsequent closing of the international border forever shifted the attention of the mountaineering world to Nepal.

Nepal was first opened to foreigners in 1949. In that year the Rana regime permitted two small parties — one American and one Swiss — to reconnoiter the Everest and Annapurna regions respectively. Subsequently, in 1950 Maurice Herzog reached the summit of Annapurna — the first mountain higher than 8,000 meters to be climbed. And in 1953 Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay reached the summit of Everest. These early successes spawned numerous
other mountaineering expeditions, and during the late 1950s as many as twenty Everest expeditions might be launched in a given year, flooding the tiny Khumbu (Everest) region with money and Western cultural influence.14

While mountaineering may have been the original source of Western interest in Nepal, the average visitor could hardly hope to attempt one of the country’s 8,000-meter peaks. Instead, average Western tourists had to be satisfied with more modest goals. One of these was to approach as closely as possible to the great peaks — and, in the case of the peaks of the Annapurna massif, to walk all the way around them. Generally, tourists in Nepal during the late 1950s and early 60s stayed only a few days, and rarely left the Kathmandu valley. However, in 1964 Colonel Jimmy Roberts initiated the first “trek,” guiding a small group of Americans on a tour of the mountains.15 As the number of trekkers grew in the years that followed, so did the number of companies organizing such extended tours. Thus was the Western cultural practice of mountain trekking born. Today it is no mere coincidence today that Nepal’s two most popular trekking areas lie adjacent to seven of the world’s fourteen 8,000-meter mountains.16 Combined, these two regions host more than 75 percent of all the trekkers who visit the country in a given year.

Though Western interest in such places was new, the trails traveled were the same local people had used for centuries to trade salt and other commodities. And eventually the existence of such already-established routes of travel facilitated a change in trekking practices, as organized treks were gradually surpassed in popularity by the “teahouse” trek. According to this now-ubiquitous practice, budget-minded trekkers carry only the bare essentials, and pay for food and lodging along the way at numerous local lodges modified to accommodate their needs. As the volume of trekkers has increased (along with the potential for revenue), so have the original teahouses given way in well-traveled locales to larger trekker hotels. The phenomenon is now so well established that in regions such as Khumbu and Annapurna the proliferation of full-service trekker hotels has transformed the traditional urban morphology.

As already mentioned, the inhabitants of the Himalayas have a long history of contact, migration and entrepreneurship. And with many traditional pursuits failing during the mid-twentieth century, trekking tourism was welcomed as a new source of income. This is clearly evident today in the “packaging” of “sites” in these areas. This packaging, a kind of “imagination,” represents a calculated play on the desires of the tourist, predicated in particular on what Victor Turner has called the “liminal space,” or the “ritual inversion” by which normality isforgone for the sacred, the phenomenal, etc. Such calculation is also involved in the way local people package themselves, for to maintain this liminal quality, the tourist must not be allowed to drift too far from what is comfortable. In this sense, two distinct marketing strategies may be found along the trail in Nepal: one focused on Tibet, Tibetan Buddhism, and the Himalayas themselves; the other on seemingly anachronistic representations of “the West.” Together, these trajectories function in a complementary manner to appeal to a broad demographic of foreign visitors.

As noted, a certain familiarity with the techniques of economic extraction was already present in the Himalayas as a legacy of the historic use of its valleys as conduits for trade and pilgrimage. The bhätti (teahouse) as a commercial enterprise was equally as old, and merely needed to be adapted to a new clientele. Of course, the increase in volume (and potential for extraction) due to the advent of international tourism required certain cultural adjustments. And so today comfort and technology have become the mantras of such establishments. Thus, one may see signs for the “Hotel Bob Marley,” boasting a “real hot shower”; or for a bakery advertising the “Most Sophisticated Technique.” And in clear reflection of the new tourist imaginary, one may encounter numerous establishments named “Hotel Tibet,” “New Tibetan Hotel,” “Tibet Hotel,” or just plain “Tibetan” (fig. 2). In Nepal a name is worth a thousand rupees (or more) a night. And the primary goal of most lodges is to be listed in such tourist guides as Lonely Planet’s Nepal Handbook, or the Rough Guide.

Accommodation has also not been the only space of imagination in the “new” Himalayas. For example, lodge owners have gone to great lengths to establish a suitable cuisine for tourists. Thus, pizza, apple pie, and chocolate cake became trail staples many years ago and are now being challenged by Mexican food and other “ethnic” delights. Moreover, tourism development has improved access to a wide range of consumer goods for consumption by tourists and the local population (fig. 3). Today such “modern” elements minimize the degree to which tourists must “go native,” all while underscoring the supposedly backward technologies they have come to see. Despite the ostensibly comical nature of development in the Himalayas, such development is serious business.

FIGURE 2. The Hotel Bob Marley in Muktinath.
TREKKING IN THE ANNAPURNA REGION

The Mustang and Annapurna regions are located in the Himalayan chain of central Nepal near the border with the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). First recognized as a potential site for conservation and tourism by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in 1973, the area was not opened to trekkers until 1977. The delay was partly caused by the political situation during the 1960s and 70s, when the Annapurna region—and, more specifically, the area of Mustang to its north—was used by the National Volunteer Defense Army of Tibet (NVDA — popularly called the Chushi Gangdruk) as a staging ground for cross-border forays. The area was first occupied by the NVDA in 1959, after Tibet was seized by China’s People’s Liberation Army (PLA). And the NVDA was not alone on this wild frontier: at the time the American CIA was training Tibetans in the United States and supplying the NVDA in hopes of mounting an adequate resistance to communism in Asia. Thus, despite being singled out as a site for cultural tourism, the UNDP’s development goals clashed with the local reality of war. The situation in the Annapurna and Mustang area also conflicted with Nepal’s desire to provide more diverse locations for tourists, and so elicit increased spending and longer stays in the country.

In 1973 the PRC issued Nepal’s King Mahendra a strong warning, asking him to disband the guerilla units within Nepal’s borders. China even suggested that its troops might need to enter Nepal if Nepal could not resolve the problem on its own. Having long looked the other way, Nepal successfully (and peacefully) disbanded and imprisoned the guerillas (with the unwitting help of the Dalai Lama) in 1974. And the country immediately engaged in a process of expropriation of land and imprisonment of all suspected of being allied with the NVDA. After sufficient pacification, the Annapurna region was opened for tourists in 1977. The Mustang area, which still demonstrated a degree of recalcitrance, remained closed to all foreigners and development until 1991. Despite the violent history of the region, once it was opened to foreigners, tourism was quickly embraced. And it soon became clear that an abrupt and uncontrolled influx of trekkers had the potential to cause serious environmental and social damage.

THE ANNAPURNA CONSERVATION AREA PROJECT

Despite years of development efforts, Nepal is still characterized by extremely poor internal transportation. As a result, very few areas actually receive tourists, and those that do are inundated with them. For example, the Annapurna region receives 58 percent of all trekking tourists in a given year. Thus, one would expect (and rightly so) that the region is under great environmental pressure.

Throughout the twentieth century increases in population and a series of droughts had already combined with the lack of indigenous mitigation technologies to cause severe environmental degradation in highland areas. Among other things, this had contributed to the mass migration from the mountains to the Terai. But it was not until 1972, at the behest of the UNDP, that Nepal began to consider an organized effort to protect its natural resources. His Majesty’s Government (HMG) soon concluded that poverty and population pressure were the root causes of such environmental degradation. And it proposed that sustainable solutions could be found by combining tourism with development in affected regions.

In 1986 the King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation initiated the Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP) in association with the World Wildlife Fund. Together, these two organizations now fund a range of supposedly “sustainable” development, conservation, and/or rehabilitation projects. A primary and ongoing concern in the Annapurna area (and throughout Nepal) is deforestation and the consequent erosion and depletion of soil for agricultural uses. The ACAP program has been unique because instead of declaring the Annapurna region to be a “national park,” it has classified it as a “conservation area,” thus allowing local inhabitants to continue to practice agro-pastoral lifestyles. This has meant, however, that at the same time that major efforts are underway to increase tourist revenues, ACAP has had to find ways to mitigate the environmental impacts of both the tourists and the local inhabitants. There are approximately 100,000 inhabitants in the Annapurna region. However, during the five months of September, October, February, March and April, with the arrival of trekkers, sup-
port staff, and Indian pilgrims, the total number of people in the region nearly doubles. Clearly, the impact of this cyclical population increase is very significant. In response, the ACAP management plan has focused on initiatives in the several important areas: alternative energy sources, economic development, and environmental protection.

By contrast to such “technological” campaigns, the ACAP management plan is selective in its cultural-heritage goals. In fact, concern for “culture” is primarily limited to bodies of local practice that might be deemed useful in coping with changes to the environment. When material “heritage” is considered at all, it normally has to do with such practices as maintaining and preserving “idol-making” and “traditional” painting. Such a focus clearly displays a bias toward arts and crafts that are symbolic of institutional “culture.” In short, ACAP is interested in preserving only those practices and technologies most capable of reproducing the anachronism thought to be central to the tourist’s desires. For example, no mention is made regarding the aesthetic quality or functional adequacy of the traditional dwelling and/or village morphology. Indeed, this (intentional?) oversight on the part of the ACAP plan has made possible the proliferation of hotels in the region.

One particularly significant ACAP program has been the Lodge Management Committee (LMC). Among other responsibilities, LMC is responsible for standardizing prices and initiating toilet construction and alternative energy schemes. Another of LMC’s goals is to limit economic leakage. A study in 1984 found that tourists spent US$3 per day in the region, but that only 6.7 percent of that was retained in the local economy. By contrast, a study in 1994 found that tourists spent US$5 per day, and that 50 percent was being retained. Clearly, despite a persisting low level of overall expenditure, economic leakage is now being curtailed. In part, success can be attributed to the increased level of service provided by local entrepreneurs, which has cut into the previous reliance of trekkers on outside agencies. Among its initiatives in this direction, ACAP, through the auspices of LMC, has directly encouraged certain best practices in running a “hotel” by offering courses in cooking and lodge management. As a sign of the success of these programs today, it is common to see “certificates of participation” from LMC proudly displayed on the walls of many establishments (FIG. 4).

Independent trekking results in a more substantial and even distribution of capital to the hinterlands. Success in this activity, however, can only be facilitated by sufficient and acceptable accommodations.

THE YAK RYU HOTEL

The Manang valley is situated along the northern border of Nepal between the Kali Gandaki and Marsyandi river valleys and behind the Annapurna massif (FIG. 5). Since the late eighteenth century, Kathmandu has afforded its inhabitants special dispensation as international traders, presumably in return for their acquiescence to rule by the Shah King. The cosmopolitan disposition of the Manangis makes their region ripe for “imagination.” Indeed, hotels in the


FIGURE 5. Annapurna Conservation area and vicinity map.
Manang valley constitute the largest and most elaborate along the eastern half of the Annapurna circuit. Some of the issues surrounding their development can be better understood through a case study of one such hotel.

Ghyaru, a village in the Manang Valley, is somewhat off the beaten track of the Annapurna circuit. This trip involves a three-week, 150-mile trek along two river valleys and over a high mountain pass, thus circling the Annapurna Himal. In 1995 Ghyaru stood apart as an anachronistic hiccup in a region marked by an otherwise burgeoning tourist economy. It boasted none of the amenities that the trail was quickly becoming famous for. However, Cesar and I would not have ventured there were it not for this enticing description in a guidebook (fig. 6):

The extra effort and time involved in taking the high route [to Manang] is more than worthwhile: the views from this route are some of the best on the whole trek and combine with the altitude (you climb about 500m/1640ft above lower Pisang) to really take your breath away. "Climb high, sleep low" is part of the advice given to guard against altitude sickness, so taking the high route will help you acclimatise better than following the low one. The high route is also far more interesting, passing through the ancient villages of Ghyaru and Ngawal and past the ruins of and old fort.

In 1995 there were no hotels in “ancient” Ghyaru, only one teahouse. Yet by 1999 all that had changed. Most importantly the Yak Ryu Mount View Resort opened there in 1997. Owned by Lamkey Gurung and managed by his son and eldest daughter, the Yak Ryu provides a paradoxical example of development and continuity. In this sense it is typical of the new breed of guesthouses in the mountains of Nepal that reflect the latest iteration of some thirty years of adaptation and local creativity.

Unlike most Bhotiya dwellings, the Yak Ryu is bilaterally symmetrical (fig. 7). It has two floors, and the entrance faces south. Immediately inside the front door one finds the dining hall/“cold store,” and from there one may pass through a second door on axis with the main entrance and into the lodging area. The dining hall is equipped with tables and chairs, and the significant amount of glazing along its southern wall affords good views of Lamjung Himal (6986 m.), Annapurna II (7937 m.), and up the Manang valley toward Annapurna III (7555 m.) and Gangapurna (7455 m.). The cold store sells candy bars, film, batteries, and cigarettes — basic necessities for the trail-weary trekker. At the time of my visit in 1999 there was a Yak head hanging in the dining hall and a modern mountain bike leaning against one wall (which seemed altogether out of place, since trails in the area are too steep for biking).

The Yak Ryu’s lodge area consists of guestrooms around a covered, double-height court. In the center of the court is a stove surrounded by benches, and in the northeastern corner of the first floor is a toilet room and shower (called the bathroom). The shower consists of a raised concrete platform with a drain; one uses a bucket of hot water (heated in the kitchen) and a ladle to wash. Likewise, the toilet, a vitreous-china squat fixture, is “flushed” by a scoop of water from an adjacent bucket. There are four guestrooms on the ground level — each a double-occupancy room with two single beds and a small table and stool. Each also has at least one window, some of which offer mountain views. The second-floor guestrooms are reached by means of a stair and a loggia cantilevered all the way around the wall of the interior courtyard.

\[\text{Figure 6. View of the Annapurna Himal from Ghyaru.}\]

\[\text{Figure 7. Yak Ryu Mount View Resort: first-floor plan.}\]
There are six guestrooms on this floor: four are double occupancy, and two are dormitories that accommodate four to five individuals each. At the southern end of the second floor, opposite the stair, a door opens onto a roof patio above the dining hall. The patio is of sufficient slope to drain both east and west. From this vantage point there is an exceptional view across the Manang Valley to the Annapurna Himal.

The Yak Ryu was designed by Lamkey’s brother, and was constructed, as is often the case now, by paid labor. One of its most noticeable features is its detached kitchen. This is uncharacteristic of dwellings in the area (and of older hotels and teahouses), but it is demonstrative of some of the latest thinking in the hotel design. Most importantly, a detached kitchen mitigates the formerly chronic problem of smoky guestrooms in poorly ventilated lodges. In fact, guidebooks and ACAP literature suggest that trekkers look for such “developments” as a way to promote sustainable tourism. The belief is that as proprietors become aware of such recommendations, there will be additional pressure to incorporate such technologies as backboilers and solar heaters. A detached kitchen, often located in the courtyard, is one particularly noticeable way to display such a progressive awareness.

Another such “development” is the internal bathroom and shower. The “traditional” guesthouse bathroom was a detached outhouse — in effect, a privatization of the local practice of using the fields. However, a public-awareness campaign sponsored by UNESCO and other international aid agencies has now focused increased attention on the issue of sanitation. Waterborne diseases such as dysentery have long been linked to poor sanitation practices. And with village populations sometimes swelling by nearly 300 persons a night during the high trekking season, the waste problem may become substantial, to say the least. Indeed, better sanitation is one of the more successful new technologies introduced to rural Nepal. It can clearly be seen in the burgeoning of new “private” outhouses (Fig. 8).

Of the many “transformations” of the hotel as a typology, however, possibly the most radical has been the introduction of large glass windows. In a traditional Bhotiya dwelling windows were small openings with operable wooden shutters (Fig. 9). Their purpose was more environmental than aesthetic, since they primarily facilitated cross-ventilation and admitted small amounts of light into interior spaces. The primary source of light and ventilation, however, was the door. For this reason Bhotiya houses were traditionally oriented inward, toward the court, and to the south. As Katherine Blair has noted, this was primarily an adjustment to the extreme winds and cold of the Himalayan winter. But it also served to provide protected horizontal surfaces with southern exposure for the drying of grain. The relative dearth of windows (and the modest size of those present) also reflected defensive considerations, for Bhotiya peoples once engaged in significant amounts of war. In modern hotels, however, the new availability of glass has combined with the cultural impact of tourism to privilege the “view.” Such new emphasis on seeing out has also created a building typology that often contrasts with traditional dwellings (Fig. 10). Views are, of course, an amenity that trekkers take seriously when choosing a hotel, and their desire to experience the environment, even when at rest, is not lost on the hoteliers. Thus, the Yak Ryu not only features large areas of glass in its dining hall, but the superior quality of its views is trumpeted on its signs (Fig. 11).

The above “developments” constitute a general trend toward improving the “comfort” of travelers. In this regard, the “hot shower” (often advertised — rarely realized) is a perennial benchmark of quality. In fact, discerning just what
kind of shower a hotel provides — cold, hot, bucket, outdoor, indoor (drafty,) indoor (not drafty,) dirt floor, wood floor, concrete floor, tile floor, solar, backboiler, electric, etc. — may be of utmost importance to the weary and/or environmentally conscious trekker. The Yak Ryu’s shower, a bucket and a ladle, is modest by current standards, but its location makes it a comfortable experience (fig. 12). By contrast, running water will do little good if it is only provided in a drafty, wood-slat outhouse that doubles as a bathroom. Running water alone does not a comfortable shower make! The Yak Ryu bathroom, conveniently located inside the hotel and surrounded by thick masonry walls, is not drafty. Moreover, its concrete floor and drain presumably make for a more hygienic surface than perpetually damp wood or dirt.

Ironically, however, the simple shower is a serious offender when it comes to the ultimately paradoxical effort to preserve the natural environment for adventure tourism. For despite being new, the Yak Ryu does not employ the latest technologies encouraged by ACAP: the backboiler or the solar water heater. The demands of trekkers for hot water are significant, and ACAP has long recognized the need for a more efficient, environmentally benign fuel source than firewood. Indeed, developing a sustainable hot water supply is one of the technological advances that will be most needed if volumes of tourists are to continue to increase while minimizing environmental damage. In general, guidebooks and ACAP literature encourage trekkers to patronize only environmentally conscious establishments, and many trekkers dutifully check levels of compliance before agreeing to stay for the night. Such a system does help ensure that hotels will be continually upgraded to reflect new conservation technologies. Indeed, in the Himalayas it is good business to be environmentally conscious — or at least to market environmental consciousness, regardless of actual practice.

Another important area where the “comfort” factor is manifested in the packaging of hotels is in the creation of idyllic landscapes for visual consumption. Great emphasis is now placed on beautifying hotel grounds with flowers and artwork. To be sure, an interest in flowers is not an imported institution; Tibetans and Bhotiya alike are famous for their interest in horticulture. However, the siting of a garden or patio for sedentary occupation and meditation is a new phenomenon. Before tourism, it would have been considered wasteful to allocate outdoor space for such a non-flexibly programmed use, since arable land was in short supply. However, such a garden for dining and/or sitting is now a key attribute in the war for paying customers. If it can provide a mountain view, as does the patio at the Yak Ryu, all the better (fig. 13).

Indoors, other attractive features of the new hotels include decorative elements that suggest the agro-pastoral life of the villagers. For example, wood carvings and column capitals may allude to vernacular detailing. But such “treatments” are often not derivative of local building practices. Instead, they may be rooted in an individual hotelier’s or builder’s “imagination” of...
the pastoral. Also in this regard, full-height doorways, “Western”
stairs, sit-down flush toilets, and comical faux finishes may
either mitigate or exacerbate the sense of cultural “difference,”
depending on the particulars of installation and context.

The above descriptions serve to emphasize that the
degree of “going native” that a trekker chooses to engage in
represents a constant negotiation between the disjuncted tra-
jectories of development and progress. Within such a context
of packaged ethnographic pasts, however, it would be a mis-
take to assume the new hotels are aberrations in an otherwise
homogeneous material landscape. The Yak Ryu and other
hotels are the conscious product of analysis, consideration
and design by their owners. As such, their cultural details,
programmatic innovations, and technological improvements
are all rooted in the local dwelling. Typologically, the hotel
can thus be conceived of as a large house, in which certain
programs and detailing have been modified to accommodate a
newer and more transient occupancy.

It may help at this point to note that the hotels of the
Thakuri (hill peoples) of Nepal’s lower elevations are quite
different in terms of their design. Thakuri hotels are struc-
tured around single- or double-loaded corridors, and follow
the linear pattern and cardinal orientation of Thakuri
dwellings. Thakuri hotels also rarely exceed two stories, and
they exhibit gables and/or hipped roof assemblies in keeping
with the local idiom. It has often been pointed out that such
hotels represent a logical progression from the original tea-
houses, which were merely houses opened up to trekkers.
That one such hotel (or many) may be called the “Tibet
Hotel” does not make it any less a product of traditional
building practices or local typology.

In contradistinction are the hotels of the upper
Himalayas (such as the Yak Ryu). These structures typically
make use of a courtyard typology for internal circulation, are
three or more stories tall, and are constructed of dry stone
masonry and timber, much like traditional Bhotiya dwellings.
Certainly, these similarities are as much structural as cultural.
Above all, it is the dearth of timber at high altitude that has
forced Bhotiya hotels to be constructed of stone. For cen-
turies dwellings in the region have been constructed this
way, with timbers being employed only in roof and floor
framing. However, today environmental determinants have
become exacerbated to the point where they may seem as
important as cultural ones. The point is that despite the
newness of the hotel as a typology, and despite its having
resulted from a global phenomenon, its morphology is entirely
the product of individual invention and local creativity —
“imagination” in the parlance of Appadurai.

THE BHOTIYA HOUSE TYPOLOGY

Lamkey Gurung’s own house can help elucidate the
above assertion with regard to the design of the Yak Ryu. A
few steps away from the Yak Ryu, it is typical of Ghyaru and
Bhotiya dwellings in the Manang valley. The house is a
three-story structure of dry-masonry perimeter and interior
bearing walls, with an otherwise wood post-and-beam system
of floor supports (fig. 14). The first floor is used primarily
to stable family animals and store firewood and agricultural
implements. Its single entrance opens on the west to a veg-
etable garden.31 Inside, a traditional log ladder leads up to
the second-floor living space, which takes an L-shape (oriented to the northeast) and includes a small outdoor patio with partial-height walls on the west.

At ground level, the house includes a court in the center open to the south, and there is another outdoor area with southern exposure used for bathing and cleaning vegetables. Southern exposure and orientation are critical for all outdoor surfaces so they may be used to dry grain and vegetables. The courtyard to the south is defined from the adjacent public walkway by a partial-height wall. This separation is a defensive attribute of the Bhotiya dwelling, and also helps maintain privacy.

The kitchen occupies the northwest corner of the second floor. Here one can find the few major changes in dwelling design that have emerged from recent development efforts: an electric light and a tin chimney (Fig. 15). All structures in Ghyaru have had access to electricity since 1996. A meter affixed to each is read twice yearly, and villagers pay according to their usage (Fig. 16). It is likely, however, that usage is modest by those not engaged in tourism, since they otherwise may have limited access to cash.

It is instructive to compare the image of Lamkey’s kitchen to David Snellgrove’s 1956 impression of a kitchen in Jomson:

This was the first Thakali house we had entered and I gazed astounded. We found ourselves in a bright kitchen, spotlessly clean. At the far side of the room was a stove and hearth of clay neatly coated with dull red wash. Upon the stove stood pots of solid brass, and other pots and dishes were placed on shelves against the wall. It was astounding because everything seemed arranged for show; one was reminded of similar arrays in some old English hotels."

Indeed, if kitchens are to be taken as a benchmark of wealth and fashion, the “difference” between 1956 and 1999, between domestic and commercial spaces, is rather minimal. A comparison between Snellgrove’s account and present conditions might even indicate that tourism has served more to maintain standards of living than to bring great new wealth to the region (Fig. 17).

From the western patio of Lamkey’s house, one can scale another set of ladders to the third and final floor. This level is solely used for the storage and working of grain.

\[ \text{Figure 14. Lamkey’s second-floor plan.} \]

\[ \text{Figure 15. Lamkey Gurung’s kitchen.} \]

\[ \text{Figure 16. Lamkey’s electric meter.} \]
noted above, its orientation is toward the south, but it also includes covered areas to the north and east to protect the grain from rain and snow. These areas also serve as windbreaks since the prevailing winds come from the east. Like other Bhotiya houses, Lamkey’s house is characterized by a clear emphasis on outdoor work surfaces with maximum exposure to sun and minimum exposure to wind. But the house must also include storage space for all food used in a typical year. Finally, where arable land is at a premium, traditional Bhotiya houses must have a modest footprint. Multistory, densely planned courtyard-type dwellings, therefore, are often built immediately next to one another, limiting front, rear and side yards to the minimum needed for intravillage circulation.

As the above description indicates, there are a number of similarities between Lamkey’s dwelling and the Yak Ryu (figs. 18, 19). Most noticeably, the courtyard is a persistent feature, as is the pattern of second-story circulation around the courtyard perimeter. In this regard, the main difference between dwelling and lodge, aside from scale, involves the complete enclosure of the courtyard in the Yak Ryu from the elements. This no doubt resulted from a desire to provide additional “comfort” for trekkers. Indeed, the enclosed court with its central stove and benches was explicitly requested by the proprietor to improve the appeal of the Yak Ryu by creating a warm “public” space where trekkers could gather to chat.

While the location of the Yak Ryu’s dining hall as a ground-floor “addition” to the main structure may not have followed traditional prototypes, it represents more of a compromise with local building practice than an aberration. The designer wished to orient large amounts of glazing toward the view, yet he could not do so and provide support for a second-story masonry perimeter wall above. In other hotels in the Manang valley the kitchen and dining hall are commonly located on the top floor. Such a solution is in keeping with the local cultural predilection toward eating above ground level. However, as noted above, hotels with indoor kitchens have been discouraged by guidebooks to cut down on smoke. Consequently, the location of the Yak Ryu’s dining hall is a functional solution, even if it does stand out as rather curious from a cultural standpoint.

It is clear from the above discussion that the hotel is more a derivation of the traditional house than an altogether foreign typology. Diagrammatically, orientation and circulation within the house and hotel are similar; the typical hotel merely exhibits some necessary “imaginations” in detail and technology due to transformations in scale and program. And while occasional foreign elements may appear in such structures, they usually represent local interpretations rather than literal infiltrations. The trekker hotel, despite its various new technologies, is thus best thought of as an evolving local element in the Annapurna material landscape.
Bryn Thomas has described the early “guided tours” in the Annapurna region as traveling bubbles of pampered splendor and catered food. With the advent of the new hotels, the above characterization has changed little, save that the bubbles are now fixed, and the trekkers navigate between them. This, of course, was a necessary transformation if capital was to be successfully redistributed and economic leakage to Kathmandu and/or the West was to be limited.

However, perhaps a more important realization is that in the case of the Annapurna region, “tourism” is nothing new. It would be a mistake to view this region and its (many) culture(s) as hermetically sealed. For centuries there has been contact with visitors to the region. And the inhabitants, themselves, have even engaged in “touring.” Lamkey Gurung, the proprietor of the Yak Ryu Mountain View Resort, has been to Thailand, Vietnam, Burma, China, and Malaysia on “business,” and can communicate in several languages. Lamkey’s “travels” echo David Snellgrove’s findings in 1956:

[The Manangis] are keen traders and travelers — Burma, Singapore and Hong Kong are all known to them.

Surely one would be remiss (or patronizing) to assert that Lamkey needs “protection” from tourists as purveyors of Western materialism (de facto cultural imperialism). In his world, tourism has become the premier economic pursuit, and the entire regional economy is predicated on its success. Furthermore, tourism does not represent an alien economy degrading local cultures; in fact, it has allowed those cultures to persist and grow in their respective locales. The development of tourism helped stem mass migration to the lowlands following the demise of the Tibetan salt trade. Indeed, this article has been as much about tourists as it has been about “locals,” for tourism is now an integral part of local practice. Tourists have, in fact, become local, albeit transient, and their presence is seen as ensuring the continued prosperity of the region. In this regard, the trekker hotel may be understood as a vehicle for the persistence of culture.

As a final note, one can point to examples of tourist hotels that have begun to blur the morphological link with local building patterns. In this regard, the village of Manang represents a sort of culmination of the hotel-centric development model (Fig. 20). There are, in fact, two Manangs: the traditional village, and the tourist resort. The latter has in part resulted from the immense size of some of the new hotels and their penchant for glazing on all sides. These characteristics have forced nouveau hoteliers to build on historically productive family agricultural land outside the village proper. And so such leviathans have given rise to an altogether different urban morphology, one based on objects in the open instead of the traditional practice of abutting buildings in dense, random agglomerations.

But the “cosmopolitan” character of the Manangis themselves has had much to do with the development of these hotels. As an ethnic group with special travel and trading privileges, they have engaged in commerce around the world for centuries. No doubt, the economic tools acquired in international commerce have helped them succeed in tourism-related development at home in the Himalayas. And in this sense the trekker hotel is no doubt a “new” typology that is a product of globalization. However, as I have tried to show, it also maintains significant links with traditional building patterns in both program and materials. Its “imaginations” are the product of calculated design on the part of individual proprietors and builders. In this regard, the really large hotels may be seen as constituting an evolving attraction in and of themselves. For as the example of Ghyaru has demonstrated, the concept of “attraction” in the Himalayas (aside from the mountains themselves) now involves the visceral experience of the impossibility of authenticity — the simultaneous presence of anachronism and cultural disjunction in the same space.
REFERENCE NOTES

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1. In 1999, the exchange rate was approximately 49 Nepali rupees to the U.S. dollar.
4. Ibid., p.13.
8. While it is true that parts of Nepal are currently engaged in a “civil war” waged by the Nepal Communist Party (NCP), the degree to which regions are involved in the war has been correlated directly with their access to economic development and freedom from structural inequality. Consequently, areas involved in Himalayan tourism have been consciously uninvolved in the unrest. This principle, however, may be of decreasing veracity, since a recent (so far isolated) incident in Langtang (the third most traveled trekking region after Annapurna and Khumbu) may be indicative of a shift in NCP policy and/or public complicity.
10. David Snellgrove wrote about the degree to which the Thakalis of the Kali Gandaki valley have abandoned Tibetan Buddhism and adopted only the most cursory accoutrements of devotional Hinduism. He attributed this shift to the relative efficacy of consolidation in the area by Kathmandu. Their case has, however, been an exception. Snellgrove also noted the great affinity he witnessed toward Tibetan Buddhism in 1956 during his “pilgrimage” through the region. See D. Snellgrove, Himalayan Pilgrimage (Boston and Shaftesbury: Shambala, 1989), p.177.
11. A less obvious but no less significant motivation for Himalayan tourism can be characterized as the trope of epiphany. For some time, the “West” has been fascinated with Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism, and most Himalayan travel accounts (such as Heinrich Harrer’s Seven Years in Tibet; Peter Matthiessen’s The Snow Leopard; and David Snellgrove’s quasi-academic Himalayan Pilgrimage) have offered descriptions of transcendental experiences. These and other travel accounts are readily available in Kathmandu, and rarely does one embark on a trek without one of them. See L.H. McMillin, “Enlightenment Travel: The Making of Epiphany in Tibet,” in J. Duncan and D. Gregory, eds., Writes of Passage: Reading Travel Writing (New York and London: Routledge, 1999).
12. These “tourists” were actually three women from the American Midwest in their fifties. See Stevens, “Tourism and Development in Nepal,” p.71.
13. The Annapurna Region contains the following 8000-meter peaks: Annapurna (8091m), Dhaulagiri (8167m), and Manaslu (8156m). The Solu Khumbu region contains Everest (8848m), Lhotse (8516m), Cho Oyo (8182m), and Makalu (8485m).
15. For more on this subject, see J.F. Avedon, In Exile From the Land of Snows (New York: Vintage Books, 1979); or J.K.
22. In 1995 the Annapurna region saw 50,000 trekkers (excluding porters, other support staff, and Indian pilgrims). See Kumar, Tourism and Development, p. 204.
25. One of the most ubiquitous “inventions” of the past five years is the backboiler stove. A backboiler is a simple device wherein a reservoir of water continually cycles through the kitchen hearth. Heated water cycles up to a reservoir by convection, while cold water cycles down. This is a fuel-efficient means to heat water for cooking and tourist show- ers. Both the ACAP materials and guidebooks suggest patronizing only establishments that have such devices. For more on backboiler technology, see A New Approach in Protected Area Management, p. 17.
26. Ibid., p. 29.
28. Indeed, after some interrogation, the owner of the bike, the proprietor’s son, admitted he would only use it to go down to Pisang. He would then hire a porter to carry it back up for him.
30. Ibid., p. 49
31. In Ghyaru the kitchen garden is rarely located immediately adjacent to the house. I suspect that this was once the site of another house that was recently demolished. It is also possible that Lamkey’s family had a much larger house, and they consolidated it into the present house and the adjacent garden; however, this is less likely.
33. This was not for want of technology. Large spans with bearing walls above are resolved on a regular basis in gompas (Buddhist assembly halls) and other important structures. The issue was cost. In order to resolve such a span, one needs rare, and expensive, large timbers. The solution, stepping the building back above the dining hall, was therefore really a result of “value engineering.”
34. Across all cultures in Nepal, kitchens are rarely located on the ground floor (if a dwelling is multistory), based on the Hindu principle that the ground is profane.

All drawings and photographs are by the author.