This winter break, I went to Nepal to study how technology was changing the creation and use of public space in a country that had only recently opened its doors to the outside world. I had expected through research a certain level of technological infrastructure to support this study, but when I arrived in Kathmandu, the capital of and largest city in Nepal, I realized that the gap between writings on Nepal’s infrastructure was vastly different than the kinds and amount of technology that the majority of native Nepali currently has at their disposal.

To start off with the basics, the electrical infrastructure in Nepal is existent at best. Even in the two largest cities, Kathmandu and Pokhara, homes and businesses are prone to daily blackouts that may last for an hour to half a day. No one ever knows when blackouts will occur or when the power will return. According to residents, the blackouts occur when the electrical grid is overworked due to festivals or sudden high usage, or the power is turned off preemptively by the government in order to conserve energy. The situation fares even worse in rural areas with the power going out for days on end. Farmers and others living in rural areas cannot do anything but hope for power to return at some point. Despite this lack of electricity, people in Nepal have other forms of technology at their disposal.

More recent forms of technology, smart phones and tablets, are owned by a rare minority. In my three weeks in Nepal, the only people using such technology were tourists, foreigners who had settled in Nepal, and a few successful business-owners. People still largely rely on landlines (when there is electricity), on the most basic of cellular devices, and on knowing the right people for communication and business purposes. Other forms of technology, such as laundry machines and automobiles, exist in Nepal, but like communication technology, I found that its existence has less of an impact on the daily lives of most Nepalese compared to tourism.

After the opening of its national borders in 1959, Nepal has proven itself to be a haven for trekkers and people seeking a piece of the unknown. As a result, a huge industry has been built up to sate the needs of tourists. In fact, it is second only to agriculture. For a nation that has only recently opened its doors to the outside world, tourism has had an immense impact on the culture, economy, and environment.

The first thing that a foreigner notices upon their arrival is the fervor with which people will advertise the goods they are selling. A backpack or anything else that does not look “local” projects the need for a place to spend the night, a taxi to the area’s local temple, or an interest in souvenirs. Shop owners are not afraid to let tourists know that they are being targeted for simply being tourists. After all, foreigners, especially those visiting Nepal for the first time, are willing to purchase things at the “tourist price.” This practice of marking up goods up to 300% to foreigners is well-known and if one spends the time to talk to shop owners, they are not afraid to admit to it. To them, it is the only way to make a living as rent for apartments and shop spaces increase beyond their means. The practice however expands beyond social relations and is deeply embedded in the physical constitutions of large cities and some rural parts of Nepal.

Cities (I speak only of Pokhara and Kathmandu) in Nepal are incredibly small and deeply sectioned according to intent. The center of cities is reserved for tourist activities and needs: hotels, hostels, souvenir shops, money exchange services, tour offices, and restaurants.
Understandably, most of the money for infrastructure growth has been poured into this part of the city. Electricity tends to be more stable around tourist areas, and there are sometimes sidewalks which are mainly capitalized by businesses as an extension of their shops. During festivals, especially during Pokhara’s New Year Street Festival, the streets are closed to automobile traffic to allow people to better take part in commercial activities. Again, shop owners are not ashamed to let foreigners know the intent of such festivals that are far removed from traditional Nepalese culture. Just outside of city centers, the situation is slightly different.

Most of the heavily touristed monuments lie outside of the central tourist commercial zone but that does not exclude it from commercial activities. The streets in this area are unpaved, unmarked, and dangerous for its lack of sidewalks. The sites that are most often advertised are also far from where most hotels are, and so it is common practice to take a taxi for safety and sanity’s sake. Taxis are rarely used by locals who take “local busses” instead, but it is difficult for tourists to find information on busses which operate based on local knowledge. Taxi operators make their living based on the scarcity of information, and the government makes money on the regulation of public space.

Monuments and the public spaces around them are subjected to race-based commercialization. At the main entrances of sites, fees are clearly listed for “Foreigners” and for “Nepalis.” Locals do not have to pay anything to visit monuments but foreigners must pay fees that range from as little as 30 to 750 rupees. Even foreigners who have successfully become Nepali citizen are scrutinized based on how they look, but a few words exchanged in Nepali often assure the gatekeepers they are doing their job. Although it is easy to circumvent the fees by not going through the main entrance, few taxi drivers or locals would tell you that it is possible. Outside of cities, property is viewed differently.

Outside the city, citizens are mainly farmers or operate shops catering to locals. In farm-focused areas, villagers do own their own property. Despite the growing dependence on the cities for jobs, especially for men between the ages of 18-25, the notion of property is still very important for the majority of males in Nepal. Homes and fields surrounding the homes are passed down from generation to generation but there is plenty of ownerless property in the villages. Fields in particular are shared if they are not fenced in as exclusive property. Even if property is fenced-in, villagers go in and out as they please. The beauty of the system is partially due to the openness of the culture and partially due to the unequal distribution of land typologies. According to the farmers of the village in which I stayed, tourists have been coming to farm as a part of the World Wide Opportunities for Organic Farming (WWOOF) program for over a decade but have not made much of an impact on how space is used or divided in the villages. There is simply no need to change the system because although it caters to tourists’ interests, the WWOOF program seeks to be a part of Nepali culture and not separate from it. On the other hand, Eco-Farms, where tourists can farm with modern conveniences, have grown in popularity in the past few years and can be seen as one way tourism has started capitalizing on rural Nepal. Hotels are also slowly being built in villages with the hopes of capitalizing on eco-tourism.

In my three weeks in Nepal, I have observed the pull of tourism in developing the way
cities are laid out by commercial zones aimed specifically at tourists and by privatizing public space based on perceived citizenship. The change in physical space has also changed the people in many ways.

I was fortunate to meet many kind-hearted people that treated me as if I were a local after long conversations, but more often than not, I would be harassed based on how I looked. In the city, I could not walk down the street without being asked if I wanted to buy something or if I needed a place to stay. There were plenty of unscrupulous businessmen that tried to trick me out of paying extra money for goods and services I needed. It is understandable because it is their way of making a living, but this money-making mindset and the concentration of tourists has affected the way children perceive the world and interact with strangers. Walking around Nepal, either in the city or in the countryside, foreigners will always be approached by children and sometimes the elderly, asking for their pictures to be taken. Once the picture is taken, the subject will ask for candy, food, pens, or money.

Development in Nepal has happened at a neck-breaking rate, and one can only wonder how the growing demand for tourist activities will affect infrastructure, culture, and the economy in the future. Tourism is a growing industry in Nepal and arguably their strongest. It has the potential to better the lives of the Nepalese people, but it also has the potential to destroy a fragile culture and the environment.
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ENTRANCE FEE

Per. Foreigner -- Rs. 25 -- Rs. 30
Per. South Country -- Rs. 25 -- Rs. 30
Per. Nepalis -- Rs. 10 -- Rs. 15

Thank you