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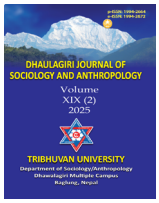

Making Space through Urban Materiality: Insights from Evolving Neighborhoods of Butwal, Nepal

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Abstract

Material possession and consumption have become prominent features of recent urbanism in Nepal. Urban dwellers tend to associate urban identity with the possession of certain materials, as evidenced in their choices for daily household use, housing design, clothing style, and other lifestyle elements. This paper examines how urban materiality has become ingrained in the daily social and cultural lives of the dwellers of these areas and how they use it to create their distinct space in the neighborhood. It also explores how new dwellers form mental associations with materials associated with urbanity in their homes and neighborhoods, striving to integrate them into their daily lives. It also analyzes how urban dwellers use such materials as signifiers of distinction and identity within the neighborhoods. Based on an analysis of first-hand qualitative data generated through ethnographic fieldwork in popular migrant destinations in Butwal city, such as Devinagar, Shankarnagar, Drivertole, and Manigram, this paper shows that urban residents in these areas prioritize urban material culture in their homes and neighborhoods, integrating it into daily life to shape social status and identity. It further demonstrates how objectively neutral material items become subjective, value-laden entities that contribute to social segregation in the neighborhood. Ultimately, it concludes that urban materiality reinforces family status within neighborhoods, thereby distinguishing and segregating families from one another.

Keywords: Butwal, material culture; space, urbanism; urban materiality

Introduction

Defining urbanism, though it was sound simple at first glance, is a complex task. Therefore, Wheatley (1972) labels it as "one of the most protean of terms" (p. 601). However, there are some attempts to define and theorize it (Cowgill, 2004; Fischer, 1975; Hutchison, 2009; Rogers, 2020; Wirth, 1903). For instance, Hutchison (2009) defines urbanism as the characteristics of, and quality of, life in cities. Likewise, in his classical essay 'Urbanism as a way of life', Wirth (1903) presents urbanism as a characteristic way of life unique to cities and urbanization, which is characterized by dense settlements of different types of people who lack intimate personal relations but have anonymous, superficial, segmented, and transient relations. "Though numerous studies on social lives of cities have challenged his theory" (Merry, 2010, p. 120), these characteristics of urban social life are being vividly replicated in the urban areas of Nepal, and they serve as the elements of evolving urban culture. Furthermore, Stevenson (2009, p. 859) contends that "it is now generally accepted that there is no single urban way of life or culture." It is plausible to argue that no universally accepted set of characteristics defines or typifies urban culture; however, people tend to have a mental map of what is urban and what is not. It is relatively easy to understand people's perception of urban culture in terms of its material aspects, as urbanites often associate an urban identity or urbanism

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with the possession of certain material aspects.

The attachment of urban residents to various aspects of material culture is reflected in their choices of items for daily life. This is also reflected in housing style, including both interior and exterior design, clothing types, and other aspects of material culture. In this paper, I have attempted to assess people's inclination towards material culture in an urban setting, focusing on urban materiality. However, conceptualizing and defining urban materiality is not as straightforward as it seems because it includes a range of interwoven aspects. Fletcher (2012) attempts to sum up the multiple meanings attached to urban materiality as:

The materiality of urbanism encompasses the words and actions by which we relate ourselves to it, the economics of its creation and maintenance, the impact of the material on the viability of community life, and also the long-term trajectories of urban growth and decline (p. 460).

The above meaning suggested by Fletcher (2012) covers a wide array of aspects. Firstly, it denotes words as well as activities of individuals striving to live a life that complies with urbanity as well as the production economy of material goods in the urban setting. Moreover, it also entails the influence of materials on communal living as well as the lasting routes involving the growth and decay of a city. When we look from a theoretical standpoint, as Edensor (2020) argues, Marxists see urban materiality as an expression of commodity possessions, and thus it is shaped by capitalist interests, whereas assemblage theory focuses on the way various materials are combined to form a structure having unique attributes that interact and coordinate with each other. Furthermore, linking materiality to the idea of agency, McFarlane (2008) attempts to portray it as part of a social agency.

The concept of space has occupied a central position in social science disciplines such as anthropology, geography, sociology, and urban studies. As a result, it has evolved from a mere physical or geographical entity into a socially constructed phenomenon. Lefebvre (1991), one of the pioneering figures in the studies of space, maintains that space is a social construct. According to him, it is produced through social relations, and its symbolic and material dimensions are associated with the domain of power and ideology. Likewise, Massy (2005) views space as a dynamic sphere of interconnections among people; thus, it is relational in nature. Furthermore, Harvey (2006) sees it as a site where lies an intersection of sociality and materiality. For him, space is crucial in shaping people's experiences and identities. Simone (2014) found ethnographic studies highlighting the continuous making and remaking of space through ordinary people's actions that lead to social and economic transformations at a broader level. Similarly, as posited by Low (2016), space carries meanings created and contested in everyday life; thus, it is a socially constructed and reconstructed, non-neutral entity.

Butwal city, located in the Lumbini Province of Nepal, is characterized by a huge influx of migrants from the surrounding areas. It is a city that is historically based on economic transactions, and the large-scale trading is still the dominant function around which the city currently runs. In recent years, Butwal city has undergone rapid transformation owing largely to remarkable physical infrastructural developments such as the construction of an eight-lane road extending up to Nepal Nepal-India border at Belahiya, the ongoing construction of the Tinau Corridor, the construction of the International Convention Centre, expanding residential areas, and improved road connectivity linking each locality with the core city. Within Butwal, I found Devinagar, Shankarnagar, Kalikanagar, Motipur, Belbas, Yogikuti, Sukhkhanagar, Drivertole, and Manigram as the most sought-after places by in-migrants. After my repeated visits to those places and informal chats with the locals, I discovered that the prevalence of the tendency to judge the level of success and prosperity of a family based on material possessions and consumption. Against this backdrop, I aim to elucidate how urban materiality is embedded in the socio-cultural lives of the newer residents of the recently expanding parts of Butwal. In this course, I have assessed how recent residents construct mental maps of materials associated with urbanism and endeavor to integrate those maps with real life. Thus, I have tried to explain how urban materiality shapes a family's social status in the locality and how this segregation separates it from others.

Research Methods

This paper is the outcome of my fieldwork in the recently expanding residential areas of Butwal, as stated in the preceding section. I chose Butwal for fieldwork because it is one of the cities rich in the stories of migrants from the hills who played a vital role in keeping the city vibrant (Butwal Sub-metropolitan City, 2015). Earlier, it was popular as a center of economic transactions, but now it has become a destination for the permanent settlement of diverse social and cultural people (Shrestha, 2023). Regarding research methods, this paper adopts a qualitative approach that aims to provide deeper insights into the lived experiences of people in their new settlement area. Within the qualitative tradition, the research followed an ethnographic design. Among various ethnographic methods, I adopted urban ethnography, which provided me with the necessary guidelines for conducting fieldwork across various localities within Butwal city to collect the required data, analyze it, interpret it, and draw conclusions. I chose urban ethnography because the lived experiences of new residents in a city are diverse, spatial, and relational, which can best be captured and understood only through sustained, reflexive, and participatory engagement in their everyday sociocultural world. I used my own and my research participants' social networks to become acquainted with the field and to approach people in the study area to identify potential informants

and collaborators. My ethnographic fieldwork involved rounds of walking across the narrow streets and wide roads connecting various locations (called *Toles* in Nepali) within Devinagar, Kalikanagar, Yogikuti, Shankarnagar, Drivertole, Nayamill, Manigram and Mangalapur areas. Besides, a motorcycle was my reliable companion, helping me to reach the collaborator families in time. This enabled me to get close to local people and observe phenomena associated with materiality as closely as possible.

During the fieldwork that spanned more than a year, I collected needed data from twelve research participant families, three key informants, and a number of informants. Observation, Kuragraphy, and interview were the methods used to collect data during the ethnographic fieldwork. Twelve families were selected as research participants for in-depth interviews, based on data saturation (Guest et al., 2006; Hennink et al., 2017). Thus, a purposive sample of 12 families was selected for in-depth interviews until data saturation was achieved. By intentionally selecting families who had migrated within the last 15 years and were still living in the same residence at the time of fieldwork, the research ensured prolonged engagement with participants whose lived experiences were most relevant to answering the study's research questions. Three key informants were also selected purposively as I needed such individuals who worked/lived closely with the newer migrants for a long time in Butwal. To ensure anonymity, I have used pseudonyms of the participants and informants during the analysis. During data analysis, first, audio recordings of interviews and observational jottings were transcribed. The transcripts were then translated into English, which was followed by coding, categorizing and theme development. Lastly, descriptions and analyses were made based on the themes generated.

Dimensions of Urban Materiality

Owing to rapidly expanding globalization, the cities in Nepal are becoming the nodes of world economy as well as the major sites of material consumption and the city of Butwal is not an exception. Resembling the classical concept of the rural-urban dichotomy, I found the inhabitants of Butwal classifying household materials as either urban or non-urban. For them, possession of certain materials brings them closer to urbanity and I found this aspect an excellent example of urban materiality. However, such urban materiality may be evident in various ways across a city. In this paper, I have attempted to assess some of the selected aspects of urban material culture as discovered to be embedded in the lives (at home and around the neighborhood) of the inhabitants of Butwal during my field experience.

Places and Place Naming

In simple terms, a place is a specific geographical location. However, its meaning and importance increase when specific social and cultural significance is added, this establishes its recognition in society. A place symbolizes a particular location that welcomes people and facilitates their interaction, in a way that can be associated with a form of attachment (Cresswell, 2014). This means that a place is a social and cultural construct. Place naming, the process of assigning a particular name to a specific place, is an essential way by which a place is made recognizable to the broader society. The case of Devinagar, one of the densest settlement areas of Butwal City, can be taken as an example of how place naming transforms a mere geographic location into a vibrant urban place. According to an elderly man from Devinagar, current Devinagar was full of bushes and grasses for a long time, though Butwal had already grown into a city from a town. During a conversation with me sitting in the *Chautari* [a built platform constructed to be used as a resting place] at Devinagar Chowk, he remembered the past Devinagar as *Lumbini banijya campus ani school yehi vayera pani, yo chhattis kulo katera sitimiti manchhe yata tira aauthenan, sajhparepachhi riksha samet aauna darauthe* [though Lumbini Banijya College and a school had already run here, people hardly came to this area passing the canal named *Chhattis Kulo* because of fear, even rickshaw used to refuse to come here by evening]. After completing the first week of my fieldwork there in Devinagar, I understood that the transformation of the area began when some enthusiasts started to observe *Devi/Durga puja* (worshipping of goddess Durga) during the Dashain festival about 25-30 years ago at the current Devinagar Chowk. Each year, the statue of Devi was erected there to mark the commencement of Durga puja, which was worshipped during the entire festival, and finally it was immersed in the nearby Tinau River. Gradually, the area started to be known as Devinagar (the town area of the goddess Devi) and a Devi Temple was also constructed near the Chowk.

Place naming remains a critical feature of an urban neighborhood for two reasons. On the one hand, it helps make a place tangible and familiar to the public, enabling them to learn about the ideas and beliefs associated with that place's historical and social truth (Alderman, 2022). On the other hand, it echoes the way power governs territory, thereby perpetuating that dominance (Giraut & Houssay-Holzschuch, 2016). Yet another viewpoint sees it as an initiative in urban restructuring that eventually helps produce a new place identity (Mele, 2000). Whatever the reason, people tend to make efforts to name public places according to their wishes/interests. For this, they tend to adopt various strategies. Since they are geographic locations, places are physical entities. In this paper, I have portrayed them and their naming process as important aspects of urban materiality. This is because there are several place markers, in the form of concrete posts or metallic posts, to represent physical evidence of 'place naming'. Moreover, the signboards of the shops and offices also contained place names. Though place naming can take multiple forms, I focused on street naming during my

fieldwork in Devinagar, Butwal, as an important element of urban materiality.

While moving southward from the famous Chautari at Devinagar Chowk (in front of Nabin Audyogik Kadar Bahadur Rita Secondary School), there are several narrower to wider streets, named as *Path* [a Nepali word for path or street], roughly resembling a grid plan (though not well-planned grid system), that channel east and westward from the Devinagar-Jogikuti road and each having its own name. Some of the names shown in the place marker of the streets were Sagarmatha Path, Anugraha Path, Sidhdhababa Path, Resunga Path, Supa Deurali Path, Himal Path, etc. As Helleland (2012) posits, 'place names are linked to the past, mirrors reflecting various scenarios and activities of the past' (p. 102). This suggests that place names honor the past in one or another way. Furthermore, Thornton (1997) suggests that place names carry the message about the structure and content of the physical milieu as well as the way people identify, conceive, categorize and use that milieu. The street names mentioned above also indicate a shared heritage associated with the residents' places of origin or serve as signifiers of their collective attachment or unity. One of the concrete posts with a street name that caught my eye was 'Oli Path' because it was named after a surname, and I had not found such a street name till that point in time. It was worth inquiring further, so I talked to a local social activist as well as secondary level English language teacher, who disclosed that the street was named as Oli Path after the person who had opened the initial track of that street through his plot of land. My bewilderment faded out quickly as I discovered two more *Path* (street) in the same Devinagar area named after the surnames of people, namely Rana Path and Pradhan Path.

When explored further, I learnt that people willingly made significant financial contributions during the construction process of the streets to get them named as per their will. For instance, during the construction of Oli Path, the Oli families contributed the highest sum of money. As one member of the Oli family told me, they now feel quite proud of naming the street after their family surname and see it as an effort to acknowledge the important role the late Mr. Oli played in transforming the local landscape into a livable neighborhood. When I looked further into the dynamics of street-naming practices there, I discovered diverse viewpoints among the local residents. Though most of them conform to those practices, I met a few people with critical views regarding those naming practices and their broader socio-political aspects. In this context, Gaddis (2022) is quite relevant, as he argues that such street-naming practices materialize preexisting social divisions or inequalities in the locality in a concerted manner. Therefore, from the point of view of urban materiality, the above-discussed practices of street naming in the study area and erecting physical place markers carry crucial political and economic significance as they reflect people's aspiration to utilize the aspects of urban materiality to establish their position and thereby strengthen their personal as well as family status in the neighborhood.

The Designing and Construction of Houses

Urban fabric is an important element that reflects a city's uniqueness. A house represents an example of urban fabric, which serves as the point of contact between the residents of a locality within the city (Coward, 2012). *Yo ghar hamle aafno jindagi bharko kamai kharcha garera bana'ko ho, tyasaile hamle sakesamma latest saman nai rakhechham, bhanam na, kitchenma, bathroomma, relingma* [We built this house with all of our life's earnings, thus we have utilized the most contemporary items wherever possible, like in the kitchen, bathroom and the railings]; these were the remarks of a couple whom I met in their residence in Nayamill of Tilottama Municipality. Later on, during my fieldwork, I learnt that the couple's remarks reflect one of the key realities associated with housing in the study area, which applies to most house owners in those places. From this, it can be argued that materiality plays an important part in defining home (Lenhard & Samanani, 2020). Though home is more closely associated with the emotional aspects of family members, the physical structure called a house is so closely linked to it that people often perceive them synonymously. Another key finding that I made during the fieldwork was that; people tend to provide specialized attention during the construction of their houses, owing to the high investment that they have to make. Moreover, I understood that financial investment is a key factor shaping a home's materiality.

Mr. Bir Bahadur Darlami Magar was a soldier in the Gorkha Rifles in India. While he was in service, his family lived in Tahu, a village about 50 kilometers away in the Palpa district. Soon after retiring from 24 years of his service in Indian Army, his family decided to construct a house in the *ghaderi* [plot of land allocated for housing purposes] that they had bought in 2008 in Drivertole. The whole family migrated to Butwal after the house was completed in 2015. During the interview, Mr. Magar told me that, since he had retired from a well-ranked post, he had to pay special attention to the construction of his house so that it reflected his status in the locality and among his relatives. Regarding furnishing in the living room and dining room, kitchen and bath accessories as well as other household amenities Darlami family chose the latest items available in the market so that their house looks modern like a *sahariya ghar* [urban house]. They had gathered a lot of ideas about those amenities while visiting some of the Indian cities during the service period of Mr. Darlami. During the interviews, Mrs. Darlami exclaimed *pani bokne, ghas, daura jodne jasta din dainaiko dukhkha le ta chhodna man lageko ho gau* [the daily suffering associated with fetching water, cutting grass, collecting firewood, etc. forced them to leave their village]. The Magar couple further explained that they are satisfied with the life-

style in Butwal and the amenities available in their house as they have made their life much easier than it was in their village. A kind of construct about *shahar* (city) and *shahariya jivan* (city life) being easier to live was already developed in the mind of Darlami couple when they were roaming around and experiencing city life in Indian cities while Mr. Darlami Magar was serving in Indian Army which eventually led them to buy a ghaderi with the aim to construct a house after their retirement from army service. In this sense, their house reflects the outcome of their urban imagination.

To discover how people endeavor to translate their imagination of an urban residence into practice, I spoke with a Kotihawa-based contractor, Mr. S. R. Bhandari, who constructs new houses and sells them, while also building under contract. Mr. Bhandari told me that most of his clients tend to be the ones who have recently immigrated to the area from the villages of surrounding districts such as Palpa, Syangja, Gulmi, and Arghakhanchi and have a good source of income. When I inquired about those good sources of income, he opined that some of them have good business in Butwal, some have recently retired from various kinds of jobs in India or Nepal, while others have family members abroad.

According to a Manigram-based engineer, while explaining their imagined house, people frequently request the designs and colors that make their buildings stand out in the locality. He further told that people are often more concerned about the type of bath and kitchen accessories and do not hesitate to spend more in choosing expensive items if they like them. Regarding such items he stated that *pahile pahile tadak bhadak lagne kura aba normal awasyakta bane* [what were considered extravagant in the past have now become normal necessities]. He labelled the preference for housing design and associated accessories as the most pronounced aspect of urban materiality among his clients in the study area. Similar views were also shared by the owner of a bath and sanitary accessories shop during a visit to his shop during my fieldwork. These observations suggest that people in the same neighborhood tend to compete with one another, though in a latent form, over urban material possessions. Such competition indicated that the study area has been able to attract people with good source of income whether that be from business or remittance or retirement schemes.

During my fieldwork, I met another intriguing case of urban materiality expressed in housing design. The Adhikari family was living in Rampur, located in eastern Palpa, in a well-built house with all of the needed amenities. They lived happier in Rampur too. However, the family decided to leave Rampur at their son's request. A civil engineer by profession, their son wanted to settle in a town/city so that he could pursue a better career and live a relatively an easier life than in Rampur. He chose the city of Butwal as his destination and had a dream of building a unique house there. After migrating to Butwal, they lived in a rented house in Butwal; however, the Adhikari couple didn't enjoy the *bhidbhad* (hassle) of Butwal. So, they decided to build a house on the *khet* (paddy field) they had bought in Nayamill a few years ago. Since, he was a professional engineer, the son designed what he labels his dream house himself. After the house was completed, they moved into their own house. The design of this building is unique as there were no such houses in and around Butwal. When viewed from the exterior, the house has a slanted RCC slab as its roof and appears like a mini-bungalow and has an eye-catching design. The interior design of the house is also found to be different with different steps in the floors as compared to the usual interior design where the entire floor tends to be of the same level. During the interviews, the Adhikari family revealed that seeing people stopping for a while to take a look at their house makes them very happy. Both genera of the Adhikari family enjoy such a gaze of onlookers. The Adhikari family's expression was suggesting that they take their building as a symbol of distinction in the setting. This signifies another dimension of urban materiality I discovered in my study area.

Renovation of the House despite Being in Good Condition

Often, people tend to equate urbanism with modernity. This tendency was found to be prevalent amongst the residents of the city of Butwal as well. During the fieldwork, I discovered that people were redesigning/renovating their residential buildings. For Cook (2020), renovations of houses refer to the deliberate alteration of the materiality of the home by its dwellers. Similarly, Edensor (2012) sees such renovations as responses to changing social, economic, and political processes. Though there can be multiple reasons for redesigning or renovating a house, one of the most obvious is to address deterioration or functionality issues. However, what caught my attention was that people had renovated their houses even though they were in good condition.

One of the interlocutors from Shankarnagar Mr. Harihar Bhattarai, who is a senior high school teacher, owns a three storied building which his family had constructed just 15 years ago. The Bhattarai couple divulged that their children, on reaching adolescence, complained about the design of their house being too traditional or out of fashion, and thus, giving an impression that their family had a lower status in the locality. According to them, their children didn't like the frontal part of the building and wanted to redesign it so that it reflects the latest trend of housing in the area and looks like a newly constructed one. Actually, Bhattarai's residence was one of the first buildings to be built in the locality and other houses are recently constructed ones. Therefore, newer buildings have followed recent housing designs. According to the Bhattarai family, they did have the option to construct a new building in another location where they had purchased a plot of land. Still, the family's attachment to the house was immense, as they had built

it themselves and the children had been born and raised there. As a result, the family decided to demolish the front portion of the building and renovate the house to make it a 'modern type' as per the children's demand. Eventually, they broke the front face of all three stories of the building and the renovation was done in what they call the latest style. The family now believes that their building matches the popular design trends in the city and they no longer have to feel inferior in terms of housing design in their *town*. During my fieldwork, two more families were found to be redesigning their interior so that they get their drawing room in a more open type and bedrooms become bigger than before. Besides, one of the informant families from Resunga Path, in Janakinagar, informed that their house has become old-fashioned and their priority was to redesign the room arrangements, which they would do later that year.

Such attempts at renovation of the existing house, which were in good condition even after the earthquake of 2015, indicate that people tend to take material aspects associated with housing much seriously. When those houses were built, there were not many houses around and the construction was done as per the style popular at that time. However, the situation has altered now. The building construction technology has evolved significantly over time. More and more houses are being added in the neighborhood and the new houses have been built using the newer styles. People might have recognized the temporal nature of housing styles, prompting them to redesign their old-style buildings into new-looking ones. Once done, the effort helped fulfill one of their quests for urban materiality. From another perspective, such renovations indicate that people see their futures in the physical structure of their houses (Cook, 2020) and thus invest in renovating endeavors. Besides, the need to adjust to the changed context and to suit the time and locality, such renovation efforts of houses despite being in good condition can be seen as a form of competition as well as an attempt to maintain social status/identity in the neighborhood.

Gated Residence

Gated households represent an urban characteristic, and gates are associated with the discourse of urban fear. As put forward by Nosheen et al. (2021), gated households ensure that people own their homes in a secure space. This suggests that gates enhance the security of houses. Furthermore, Low (1997) claims that gates alongside walls and guards, contribute to the creation of a setting that signifies more permanent class differentiation and residential segregation. This further suggests that the household gates are no longer merely a security arrangement, as they tend to represent the social status of an urban household. Regarding the choice of gate, the view of one of the research collaborators from Yogikuti of Tilottama can be taken as a representative one, who maintained *aba gharma tyatro dherai paisa ta kharcha garisakiyo bhane gatema kina samjhauta garne ra? Ghar anusarko gate ta banamnai paryo ni* [after making such a huge investment in the house building, why compromise on the gate? After all, we have to fix a gate that complements our house]. One of the observations that I made in the study area was that the household gates have been becoming more and more expensive in recent times, owing largely to the demand for more exclusive designs. Newly built houses tend to have gates with modern design due to the recent innovations or developments in construction technology as well as the aspirations of the house owners.

Interestingly, though, I found the relatively older houses demolishing their older gates to replace them with newly designed ones. In fact, when I met one of my informants in Kalikanagar for the first time to set a date for an in-depth interview, he was watching the technicians replace the old gate of his house with a new sliding gate. As informed by an informant in Mangalapur, whenever a new building is built in the locality, it tends to have an 'attractive' gate, which directly or indirectly induces older households in the neighborhood to replace their outdated gates with newer ones so that their household matches the gate of the newly built household nearby. As he explained further, in most cases, people install new gates to meet their children's demands, who want their house to look newer. Besides being the demand of their children, it was also found to be the desire of the parents. In this case, too, there was a manifestation of the implicit sense of competition between the newer and preexisting houses. From these observations, it is plausible to deduce that the household gate has also become a signifier of the competition amongst the households in the neighborhood. It conveys that people consider a modern-looking gate both a sign of distinction and a marker of their status.

After discovering people's special focus on household gates, I spoke with another informant, the owner of a metal workshop in Kalikanagar. During the informal talk, the owner, who also designs gates himself, posited *gharko samajik haisiyat ko pahilo impression nai gate le dinchha, tyai vara manchheharule gatelai seriously line garchhan* [household gate provides the first impression of the social status of the household, therefore people are found to be taking it seriously]. He divulged further that his clients demand gates that look exclusively attractive so that their buildings do not appear inferior to others, if not superior. As a result, he had to learn newer technology for designing gates. The local people's passion for distinctiveness in their neighborhood encourages them to incur extra expenses when installing household gates, he remarked further. Analyzing the views of various informants and research collaborators, it can be deduced that household gates have already become an important aspect of urban representation in the neighborhoods within the study area. Therefore, household gate preferences and their renovation or replacement in the study area represent another important dimension of the quest for urban materiality.

Through this study, I have attempted to assess some expressions of urban materiality as experienced during my fieldwork in various settlements in and around Butwal city. One of the important points that has to be taken into consideration is that most of the inhabitants, whether they be newer or older ones, in the selected localities for this research are interconnected with each other with kinship networks that are of a diverse nature. The localities selected for this research are composed of newer and relatively older inhabitants who have been living a collective social and cultural life, owing largely to their common place of origin and kinship networks (Bhandari, 2025). However, despite living as a cohesive unit, an intriguing aspect evident in those neighborhoods is that people tend to express themselves as distinct from others. As explained above, in several cases, they strive to achieve that distinction by possessing certain materials they tend to associate with urbanity. Furthermore, another important aspect I discovered during the talks with informants and research participants was that when their quest to install a particular material aspect at home is fulfilled, they tend to view themselves as not inferior to their neighbors. In other words, the competition amongst residents in a neighborhood is manifested in urban materiality. This means that urban materiality has become a factor in differentiating people within an urban neighborhood characterized by collectivism. Thus, this paper shows that urban materiality acts as a signifier of differences amongst urban dwellers and it goes hand in hand with their shared sense of unity.

Conclusion

Urbanism covers a wide array of aspects. As an important aspect associated with urbanism, urban materiality helps us understand the way people endeavor to translate their urban imagination into real-life conditions. The key findings indicate that people tend to give urban material culture pertaining to their homes and neighborhoods paramount importance. It also illustrates how people residing in various settlement areas of Butwal endeavor to integrate material possessions into their daily lives and make them an integral part of their social status. Since the residents have placed a premium on the possession of various elements of urban material culture in and around their buildings, they have been striving to incorporate those elements into their lives. Therefore, urban materiality has been instrumental in creating their distinct space in the neighborhood for the new migrants of Butwal. Their striving has been an important factor in determining their social identity in the neighborhood, thereby segregating them from others. By nature, material culture tends to remain objective in terms of physical characteristics. However, when people attach certain meanings to it, it becomes subjective and thus turns into value-loaded entities. This paper concludes that, as subjective entities, the elements of urban materiality have not only become a signifier of differences amongst the urban residents of Butwal, but also have been acting as a factor for segregating them.

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