

A LETTER TO THE EDITORS, BY NIELS GUTSCHOW

You asked me to write about photographs : What do my photographs tell me and what do I want to capture with photographs as an architectural historian?

Well, I have chosen three photographs to illustrate my associations. First, let me tell you, I use my cameras as a rough tool which I treat like a typewriter or a hammer. They are always dusty, have to be thrown away after they have fallen into a river or hit on a rock. I prefer automatic exposure, because I want to use a minimum of time viewing an object or a scene through a tiny window. It is as if focusing the instrument takes attention and time away from really looking at things, especially when it comes to ritual events which tend to become so complex to the extent that I rather wish to

Events :

The "evidence" transmutes into a lasting document once it enters the file. In order to remember that the document captures nothing more than a second in a sequence of events, I carefully keep files of contact prints which are individually identified according to place and time. If possible, I also identify the persons seen on the photograph or the name of the owner of a building. I want to make clear, that everything is unique.

I am enclosing the example of Bhairava's chariot in Inacva, an eastern quarter of Bhaktapur, after its axle broke. The chariot carries Bhairava, the "master" (*nayah*) of Bhaktapur : in this case pulling of the chariot had started on 9 April 1988 at 5.42 p.m. The upper town's people had been strong enough to pull it uptown after only a short struggle between the two parties pulling in either directions, but just before the chariot rea-



have six eyes. The camera reduces the view in a way that I feel helpless : I lose contact with my surroundings to such an extent that I hate the situation, if needing to "work" with a camera. That agony is overcome because at the same time I know that I need to carry home some kind of "evidence". The more time I have at ease "looking" at things, the more useful the "evidence" is once it turns into a fine print which Stanislaw Klimek produces for me in his darkroom in Wrocław.

ched Damreya Square, the centre of the upper town, it collapsed after a 90-minute journey along the main road and tilted against a house. An auspicious accident, as the chariot is required to reach its destination, Yahsi-khyah, only after three days on New Year's eve. Three days time to repair the chariot and three days to have Bhairava in Inacva — a unique chance to worship him there, regardless of the position of the chariot. The photograph documents the underlying dynamics better than words. Some way or another the chariot collapses every

year, but blocking the entire road and transforming it into a temporary shrine was a unique event in 1988. It demonstrated the temporary nature of Bhairavas blessing of "place" in the best possible way.

Change :

Every few years I set out with my "tool" for a limited time to cover a certain road of the Kathmandu Valley, documenting what I see left and right. I keep certain themes in mind but I am trying to be open for surprise. My favourite theme is "change" regarding the built environment. Although an architect by training, used defining architecture as good or bad, I turn into an anthropologist and make visual notes. Beyond good or bad everything I see is fascinating. I took my first round on 4 March 1990 from 9.29 to 10.32 a.m. with my Hero Honda moped because by the end of the 80s urban development and change in landscape had be-

come very powerful : the most radical change since I visited the Valley first in 1962. Along every motorable road reinforced concrete frames came up as symbols of affluence. Something had obviously changed drastically.

When I set out for a second round on 14 November 1996, from 2.38 to 3.42 p.m. I went by a Toyota Land cruiser which for that purpose turned out to be less appropriate. But traffic had become fierce over the past six years and I had stopped touring by my beloved Hero-Honda. The tour this time took me past Thimi and Kathmandu as far as Svyambhunath. I took the earlier photographs along, searching for earlier positions to repeat photographs at certain places documenting an impressive change. "My" old house near Thimi had been pulled down, the "new" structure housed a shop behind prestigious steel shutters. Only two "pillars of



hope" were extended to indicate a future third storey. A gas station had been placed where the old house stood and next to it a fancy residence of four storeys, with a variety of sloped concrete roofs, roof terraces and balconies had sprung up. The mixture of forms and decorative motifs, document the owner's dream to get along between tradition and modernity. Hundreds of these villas have come up over the past year to park resources. In the 18th and 19th centuries affluent people built temples as individual spending had limits. The newly built villas demonstrate affluence.

The two pictures provide evidence for change. Within six years three new buildings were erected that

Let me show you an example : when I passed the road near Thimi I saw one of these concrete frames beside a house which was probably built in the early 70s. The house was made of traditional bricks (*māpa*) laid in mud mortar, large roof tiles and overhanging eaves were mediating between change and tradition, but new proportions for the windows already indicated the general move from darkness to light. The first stage of

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tell a story about many aspects of life. See, for example, the tractor in 1990, a symbol of change, that entered Bhaktapur only in 1976. Equally impressive the Tata pickup in 1996. I could write a long essay about these two photographs. In fact, I tend to write long captions, because a photograph does not speak for itself. In most cases there is an obvious message, but a second layer produces a host of sublime messages, very often

Place and Time :

To note exactly the time of the day for every photograph seems to be overdoing it. But the basic frame of a photograph represented by place and time is considered by me as the essentials to locate my eyes in both dimensions. It has almost become an obsession. Let me also tell you, that being on a documentary tour requires a lot of energy. The act of documentation is an almost



readable only by the photographer who knows the background of the place, the persons, the time of photographing. With the photographer many of these hidden layers get lost. Deciphering photographs becomes like stumbling in the dark. Your hand can identify only known objects. But there is a yet another layer : I consider a photograph "strong" when something strikes me directly. It is not a detail, not the composition. It is probably the eye of the photographer which reaches me. I recently enjoyed that experience when I saw Joseph Rock's photographs of Naxi rituals in an exhibition in Zurich. Rock had a direct eye. When I look at his photographs I do not search for details but I feel I see "everything" at once.

I admit that I look at the results of my 1990 journey along the road to Kathmandu twice a year. In the beginning I saw "documents" of change. Now it seems to me I had witnessed an explosion. Maybe because I know that 35 days after the journey in 1990 Nepal was freed from an oppressive rule. I want to say that a photograph is a witness of "age" : new layers of meaning are added in a never ending process.

breathtaking experience, which I "endure" for two hours at the most. Then comes a rest for weeks. I get nervous the day before and I channel all my energy into my eye nerves. I look at objects I had seen hundred of times but focusing for the purpose of documentation is different. In such a case I am not a detached observer but an actor. I am not searching for the "right" position or angle, but I press the button right away, knowing in a way exactly where I am. That means I have "placed" myself. Strange enough, I can produce such photographs only in Nepal, where I have a strong feeling of "place" and "time". In Germany I can't do that. When I had to document architecture in East Germany I asked Stanislaw Klimek to do that for me. I was standing beside him, we discussed what to photograph, we searched for places and angles together but he laboured through with his more sophisticated tools to produce "professional" photographs.

I talk about my experience in the form of a letter. Because I don't have a general message. There are no guidelines. Instead I am talking to you about a personal experience.