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VII. BOOK REVIEWS

Blair, Katherine D.

1983 4 Villages: Architecture in Nepal. Published by: Craft and Art Museum, 5814 Wilshire Boulevard, Los Angeles, California 90036 U.S.A. and distributed by the University of Chicago Press.

Reviewed by: John Williamson
 Cornell University

This book attempts to show the interrelationship between village architecture and the life of the people in four different villages in Nepal. Due to its brevity (71 pages), the reader is provided only with a quick glimpse of these villages. The four villages described in this book are a Tharu village in Surkhet Valley, a Gurung village in Ghandruk, the Thakali village of Marpha, and a Newar village in the Kathmandu Valley. The 29 illustrations and 56 black and white photographs are well laid out and show village scenes and plans of each village and a representative house.

The thesis of 4 Villages is how the architecture of the village is influenced by the climate, culture, agriculture, and site conditions. By studying the architecture, according to the truism, one can learn a lot about village life. The village architecture is consistently related to its agricultural, environmental, and cultural systems. Throughout the book, Blair states various practical and cultural rationales for the shape and form of the villages and houses.

The structure of the book is as follows. In the first chapter, Blair gives a very brief overview of Nepal along with diagrams on the geographic zones, climate, vegetation and settlement (some of which are adapted from Toni Hagen's Nepal: The Kingdom in the Himalayas). These diagrams are helpful for understanding how the different site and climatic conditions affect each village. The remainder of the book is divided into four chapters -- each of which describes a village. Each chapter first starts with a brief history of the ethnic group and a description of the site conditions, and how these have influenced the village layout. Next, one example house is described. In addition, Blair reports the change which has occurred in the eight year interval between her visits (1972-3 and 1980) to these villages.

The shortness of this book is both its weakness and strength. A serious scholar of architecture and/or South Asian studies would want to see more. No mention is given on construction and structural details. The history of the village and ethnic group is only briefly reported. Yet, on the other hand, because of the book's shortness and the numerous illustrations and photographs, this makes for light reading and will be enjoyed by those who are familiar with Nepal. Instead of keeping this book in one's library for reference, 4 Villages should be kept in the living room for casual reading.

4 Villages should be required reading for anyone who is designing buildings in Nepal. Often development projects have built many buildings such as schools, health posts, and panchayat service centers with little consideration given to the local conditions. As a result, many of these stand in rubble because they were unable to cope with the monsoon rains or are unbearably hot during the hot season. 4 Villages shows how the local conditions affect the architecture, and designers and planners should be able to draw from Blair's insights into their own designs, resulting in perhaps, fewer piles of rubble.