



A Structure for Veneration

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Kathmandu has long been a crossroads for the exchange of materials and ideas across Asia, an ancient city where, over the centuries, myth and reality, legend and history have merged. An abundance of statues, gardens, palaces, temples and stupas bear witness to its rich cultural past. Often appearing in small clusters, stupas are a recurring element throughout the city, found in the midst of a crowded market, intimately nestled between shops and modern apartment buildings, or in a temple courtyard, any simple alley might feature one or two of these votive monuments.

In fact, Kathmandu harbors thousands of stupas, ranging from modest and humble to outstanding and iconic. Regardless of its size, any stupa is considered to be sacred, a place for worship, and worthy of reverence. Yet two stupas have become the landmarks that define Kathmandu's face in the world: Svayambhu and Boudha. These two magnificent monuments, with their golden spires rising above the sea of urban development, infuse the Valley with a timeless splendor.

Of the two monuments, Svayambhu is of particular importance to Nepal. While Boudha holds a special meaning for Tibetan Buddhists, Svayambhu is inseparable from the history of the Kathmandu Valley. The story goes that, long ago, a giant lake filled the Kathmandu Valley. In the middle of this lake, a jewel lotus miraculously appeared. The Bodhisattva Manjushri, on pilgrimage from China, wanted to make it possible for people to see the precious *svayambhu*, or self arisen, lotus. With his sword, he cut a cleft in the mountains surrounding the valley, causing all the water of the lake to flow out. From that time on visitors could come to worship at Svayambhu, and cities and towns began to emerge in the surrounding countryside.

This mythic account of how the Kathmandu Valley came to be inhabited sustains a religious and cosmological reading of Nepal. It establishes the entire valley as a giant mandala, with the Svayambhu Stupa as its center point and the mountains encircling the valley as a border. The

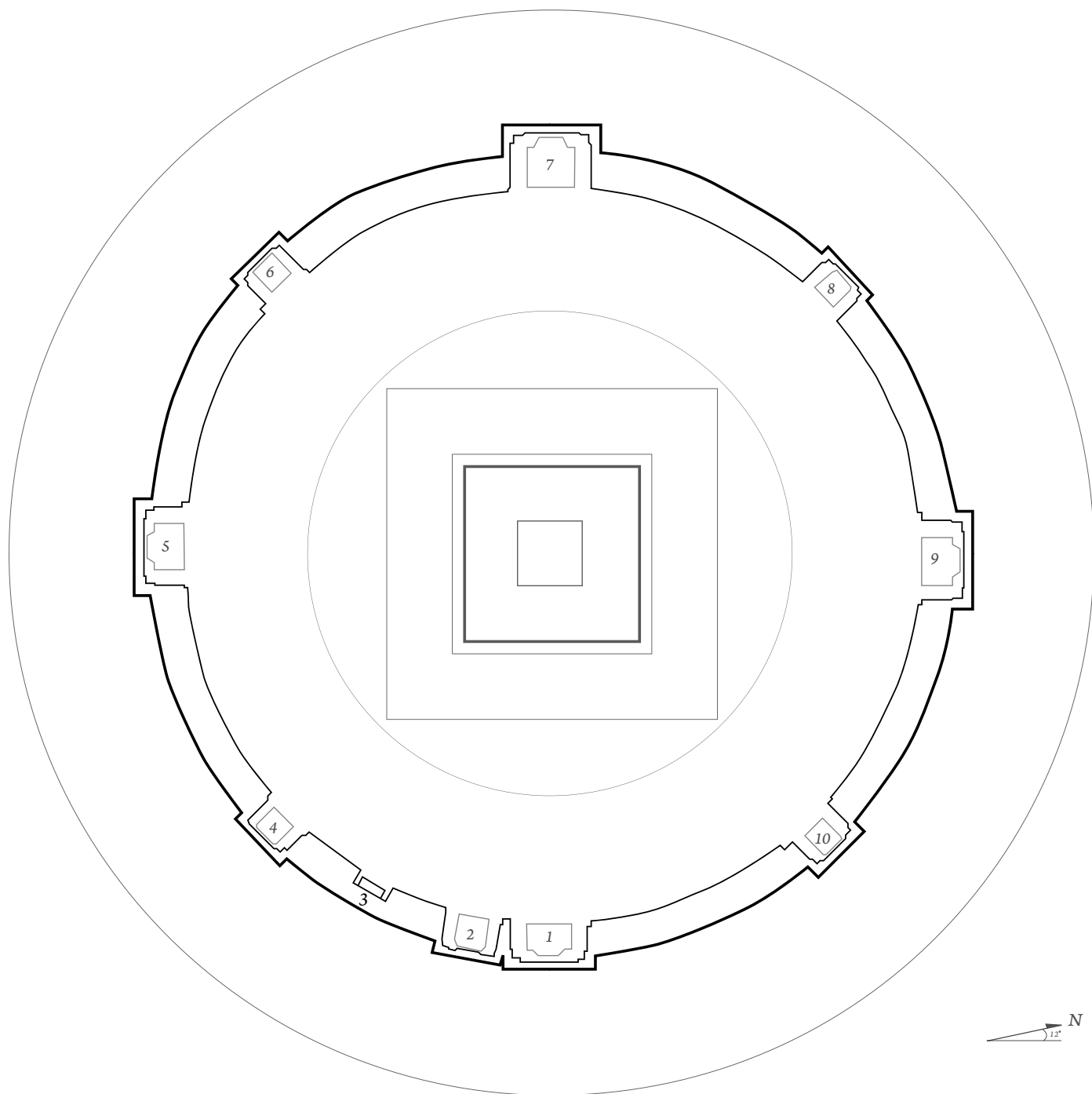
Stupa is perched on top of a small hillock next to the city's ring road. It crowns the final peak on a ridge that descends into the valley from the range of mountains surrounding it, connecting to the Jamacho, sometimes known as Nagarjuna, Mountain on the western edge of the city. Elevated above the main city the Stupa's eyes, their mood shifting with the weather, gaze out, ever watchful and evocative.

Understanding Kathmandu as both a mundane city as well as a sacred or transcendent space forms the basis for appreciating the dynamic relationships between Svayambhu, the Valley, and its inhabitants. Seeing (its beauty), knowing (its depth), and doing (veneration)¹ are inseparably linked around Svayambhu. Developed and embellished over centuries, the monument's form alludes to the changing and evolving ways the Stupa and the religious doctrines it reflects are manifested. Over time, the dynamic relationship between religion, cultural interpretation and artistic ability have made it the structure it is today.

The word 'stupa' refers to a basic dome-like structure with a spire on top and literally means a 'pile' or 'heap'.² Early stupa forms developed in India as a way to honor rulers after their passing. When asked what type of stupa should memorialize him after his death, the Buddha responded by folding his robes and turning his alms bowl upside down, placing it on top of the pile of cloth. These simple gestures established the basis for Buddhist stupas around the world.

Since the Buddha's parinirvana, stupa architecture has evolved from a simple dome structure to highly articulated forms. While Svayambhu has indeed sustained a host of modifications, ranging in scale from the frequent application of lime onto the main dome, every month or so, to the more dramatic addition of gilded copper plates in previous renewals, it has remained incredibly true to the earliest stupa forms. Notwithstanding numerous embellishments and expansions that have helped to create the Stupa's unique appearance, it has never lost the basic shape of a dome on a base, with a spire on top.³

View of Svayambhu from the West after the renovation. In front are some of the multitude of pillars, statues and artwork that surround the Stupa. Visible here are the back of a copper peacock and Avalokiteshvara.



*Plan of the Svayambhu Stupa showing the nine shrines:
 1. Akshobhya; 2. Vairocana; 3. The empty shrine of
 Vajradhatvisvari; 4. Mamaki Tara; 5. Ratnasambhava; 6.
 Pandara Tara; 7. Amitabha; 8. Arya Tara; 9. Amoghasiddhi;
 10. Sapta Locana Tara.*

The main access to the Stupa is a set of 365 stone steps that start at the base of the hill. The central gate is found at the confluence of a busy intersection, the sidewalks lined with vegetable and flower vendors, taxi stands, and people selling butter lamps and other goods for temple offerings. Beginning at its base, the stairway up to Svayambhu is a maze of paths running through a forest of towering trees. Along the paths are small votive stupas and large statues of Buddhas. Halfway up the ascent, the paths converge into a single narrow set of steps that get increasingly steeper as they get closer to the summit. Before reaching the top of the Svayambhu hillock to stand at the base of the Stupa itself, visitors pass through two high concrete walls where it is almost impossible to walk up without holding on to the metal handrails. The footsteps of countless pilgrims have worn the stone down over time so that each step slants precariously toward the Valley floor, quickly inspiring a sense of vertigo in anyone who looks down.

The final high step of the stairs places the visitor right in front of an immense, five foot long vajra and mandala made of gilt-copper repoussé resting on a stone pedestal a few paces from the eastern side of the Stupa. At the top, it is too crowded to walk except on the circumambulatory path that invites acts of devotion through the golden shrines radiating out from the Stupa's base.

On a clear day a viewing deck reveals magnificent vistas of the Kathmandu Valley. As the highest point within the city, it is a popular meeting place for tourists and pilgrims alike as well as workout spot in the mornings. The recently installed platforms to the East and South are usually full of young couples and groups of friends looking out over the city with its busy streets and old houses. From Svayambhu many of the monuments that make the Kathmandu Valley famous are visible, forming the basis for its status as one of the first UNESCO World Heritage Sites in 1979.

The Stupa's white dome, roughly twenty-two meters in diameter and eight meters in height, consists of layers

of brick and local mortar covered with lime. Nine ornate gilt-copper shrines connected by a row of Tibetan prayer wheels complete the base of the Stupa. The large cube on top of the dome is known as the *harmika* and displays the Stupa's most iconic feature, its large, brightly colored pairs of eyes on all four sides. Over the harmika towers a spire with thirteen rings, approximately ten meters in height, and graced by a large golden parasol known as a *chattrā*.

As with all stupas, Svayambhu's form is based on the mandala, a geometric pattern that symbolizes the order of the universe. Viewed from above, the tip of the Stupa's spire is at the heart of the mandala, forming the seed center, or zero point, with axial points corresponding to the four cardinal directions: East, West, North, and South. Traditionally, the ritual application of a mandala structure transforms the site into a sacred space.⁴ The placement of the highly regulated and symmetric form of the mandala works to counteract the disorder and chaos of its environment and invokes a connection between the place and a larger religious cosmology.

The Svayambhu mandala corresponds to a mandala of five buddha families, each with their own distinctive qualities and characteristics: Vairocana in the center, Akshobhya in the East, Ratnasambhava in the South, Amitabha in the West, and Amoghasiddhi in the North. The basic framework is then broken into the inter-cardinal directions—Southeast, Southwest, Northwest, and Northeast—and marked by shrines. Each shrine represents specific deities that together make up the larger cosmology of the site. Yet, in their own right, each one encompasses specific qualities, teachings, and lineages. Unlike most stupas, Svayambhu has a separate shrine on its Southeast side, dedicated to Vairocana. The addition of the ninth shrine interrupts the symmetry of the Stupa, suggesting a significant shift in doctrinal expression.⁵

There is more that distinguishes Svayambhu from other stupas. Its wooden spire, hollow and free standing, is unique.

It is configured in such a way that each of the thirteen rings forms a mandala associated with a unique deity. These deities, in turn, are connected with various monasteries in the neighboring city of Patna⁶ Like other parts of the Stupa, the spire has undergone extensive transformations over the centuries. The evolution of the stupa form went hand in hand with the expansion of Buddhist doctrines across Asia, becoming more ornate and changing from a three-ringed parasol, like the one found at Sanchi in India, to seven, eleven and finally thirteen rings like the spire of the Svayambhu Stupa.

The renovation of a sacred site is an intense act of devotion, involving hundreds of people and many months, or even years, of planning and work in order to be successfully completed. It begins with an in depth study of the present and past condition of the structure and contemplation of the options for its conservation. In Nepal, the arts and crafts traditions are practiced much as they were centuries ago, presenting a rare opportunity to undertake such projects without introducing new techniques or materials, therefore preserving not only the structure's form, but also the artistic tradition that made it.

Depending on the scale of the renovation, this is a moment to re-examine the entire structure. Broken or mangled pieces can be repaired and missing sections replaced. Like a puzzle, the thousands of parts that make up the Stupa must be taken down, repaired, re-gilded and then reinstalled. As pieces are created or recreated, Svayambhu is literally reformed. The representations through which people engage the sacred site and ultimately come to know it, are remade, forging a link to the Stupa, its place, and its history.

The most extensive renovations often involved the replacement of the central mast or *yasti*. Made from a single tree, the *yasti* was hauled by hand to Svayambhu in a process that could take over a year. In order to complete such an extensive reconstruction, the entire Stupa had to

be dismantled and its metal ornamentation melted down.⁷ Given the drastic nature of such work, it is hard to say if this would still qualify as a restoration rather than a complete reconstruction.⁸

Furthermore, the pattern of renovations of Svayambhu is such that, as far back as 1215 C.E., there has been roughly one restoration every forty or fifty years. Due to the long intervals between renovations each had to be managed without the first-hand experience of craftsmen, patrons, and priests. Adding to this problem, the Nepalese approach to renovations often involves a complete reworking of a monument. In other words, Svayambhu has been "remade" many times, its form and artwork refashioned and its structure rebuilt, based only on rare historical accounts, the interpretations of which were susceptible to changing beliefs.

Svayambhu's current form represents all the past renovations and contributions. They have made it what it is today, and taken together, they paint a picture of the Stupa through time as a constant point for inspiration and devotion. The mandala, with its nine shrines and a pathway around its base, is a structure for veneration, offering points of worship where devotees can 'touch' or connect to the greater meaning of the Stupa. Those who worship or practice at a particular shrine interact with it in relation to the larger meaning of Svayambhu, adding nuanced or layers meanings to their experience. The traditional act of circumambulating the Stupa then expands the devotion of the practitioners beyond the physical limits of the Stupa, and into their daily lives.

The temple art and architecture of Nepal offer a medium for those who wish to engage with the metaphysical ideals of Buddhist and Hindu traditions. Each day people make offerings of flowers, food, water, wine, paint pigments, candles and prayers. Statues and temples are covered with the remnants of these substances. Delicate stone hands and

1. The combination of 'seeing, knowing, and doing' as a way of understanding a structure was presented by Amity Law in *Arc 434 Forms, Spaces and Vision in the Late Middle Ages*. Princeton University. Spring 2009.
2. *The Stupa: Sacred Symbol of Enlightenment*. Crystal Mirror Series; Vol. 12. Dharma Publishing, Berkeley: 1997. pp. 5-6.
3. von Rospatt, Alexander. "A Historical Overview of the Renovation of the Svayambhucaitya at Kathmandu." Found in Part II of this book.
4. Ibid.
5. Gutschow, Niels. *The Nepalese Caitya: 1500 Years of Buddhist Votive Architecture in the Kathmandu valley*. Axel Menges. Stuttgart/London: 1997
6. Ibid. p. 23.
7. von Rospatt, Alexander.
8. For more on this topic see Bruce McCoy Owen's article "Human Agency and Divine Power: Transforming Images and Recreating Gods Among the Newar." *History of Religions*. Vol. 34, No. 3. Image and Ritual in Buddhism (Feb., 1995); pp. 201-240.

faces have become stained with splotches of red and yellow paint, the gold on images wearing off, and whole statues and structures becoming ensconced in layers of lime or soot. It is even customary to enclose a sacred structure or statue within another one, protecting the temple or statue from harm, but changing its shape. This is either done through the actual construction of an outer shell or through layers of paint and stucco applied over time. While the original pieces of art or architecture may be visually altered, they continue to function as intermediaries for worship.

As witnesses to the fifteenth renovation, it often felt like we were beholding the beginning of a new cycle. Considering the history of the Stupa – the periods when it was repaired, expanded, and embellished – each renovation fills in the gaps that have appeared over time to form a new, 'full' version, of the site. Each day, pilgrims continue to circumambulate and worship, walking around its large white dome with nine shrines before heading back to their homes in the Kathmandu Valley and beyond. Over the decades, the form will begin to break down and decay again, creating, in the future, a chance for a new generation to reconnect to the lineage of Svayambhu.



left (clockwise from top left): Pandara Tara shrine in the afternoon sunshine; Svayambhu as seen from a helicopter on Buddha Jayanti, May 27, 2010; Crowd around the Vajra and Mandala on Buddha Jayanti; Group of small, stone stupas, to the Northwest of the Stupa.

opposite: The approach up to Svayambhu on its main eastern staircase.



