

Bhutan

Architect Arpan Shah explores the unique architectural vibe that permeates the quaint hills of Bhutan



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Once an architecture student at CEPT Ahmedabad, Arpan Shah set up *Modo Designs* almost 17 years ago as a firm dedicated towards creating progressive and appropriate architecture for residential, commercial, institutional and corporate projects. The award-winning firm works on creating sensible, imaginative and innovative architecture in India.

Facing page:
(Top) The main market street and buildings in Thimphu
(Both bottom) Simtokha Dzong in Thimphu

‘Carbon Negative Happiness Positive’, is something that appends a simple yet mesmerising experience while in Bhutan. The salubrious climate, mellow townhouses, and indigenous spaces interjected with the majestic monasteries best illustrate this peaceful and tranquil country.

While contemplating through the porthole window of the Druk Flight, I was excited to explore the country of Bhutan, which is said to embrace global development along with its Buddhist tradition and culture. The ‘Land of the Thunder Dragon’ possesses many varied landscapes, and it’s a country where the rice is red and where chillies are the main ingredient of the local people. Essentially a Buddhist land, Bhutan is not frozen in time, and it’s this blending of ancient and modern that makes it endlessly enchanting.

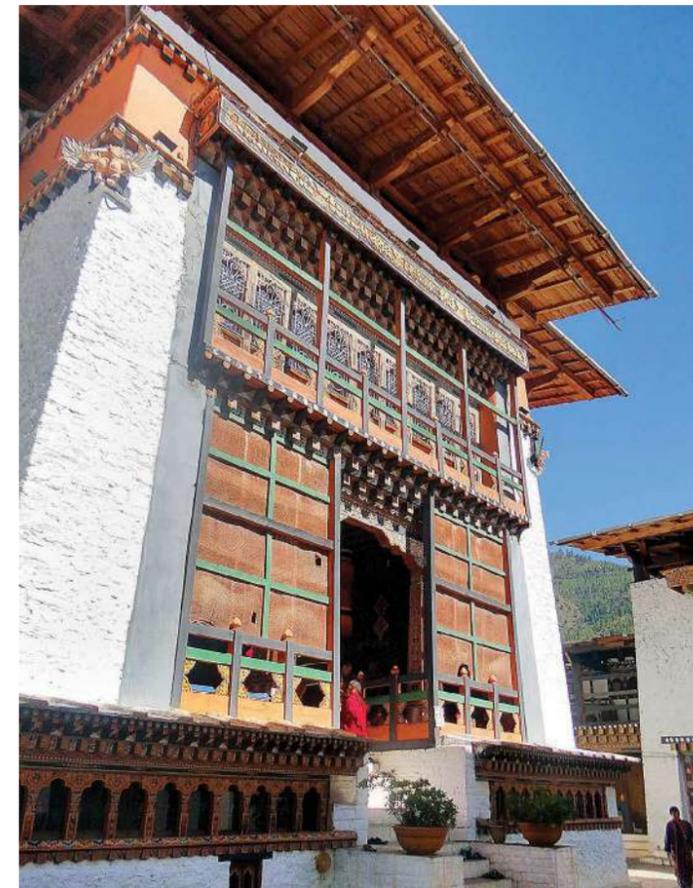
The walk through the traditionally embellished Paro airport was suggestive of the unique cultural realm I was entering. I sensed an air of peace and tranquility as if I’d gone back into time, far from the hectic polluted urban city I’d left behind.

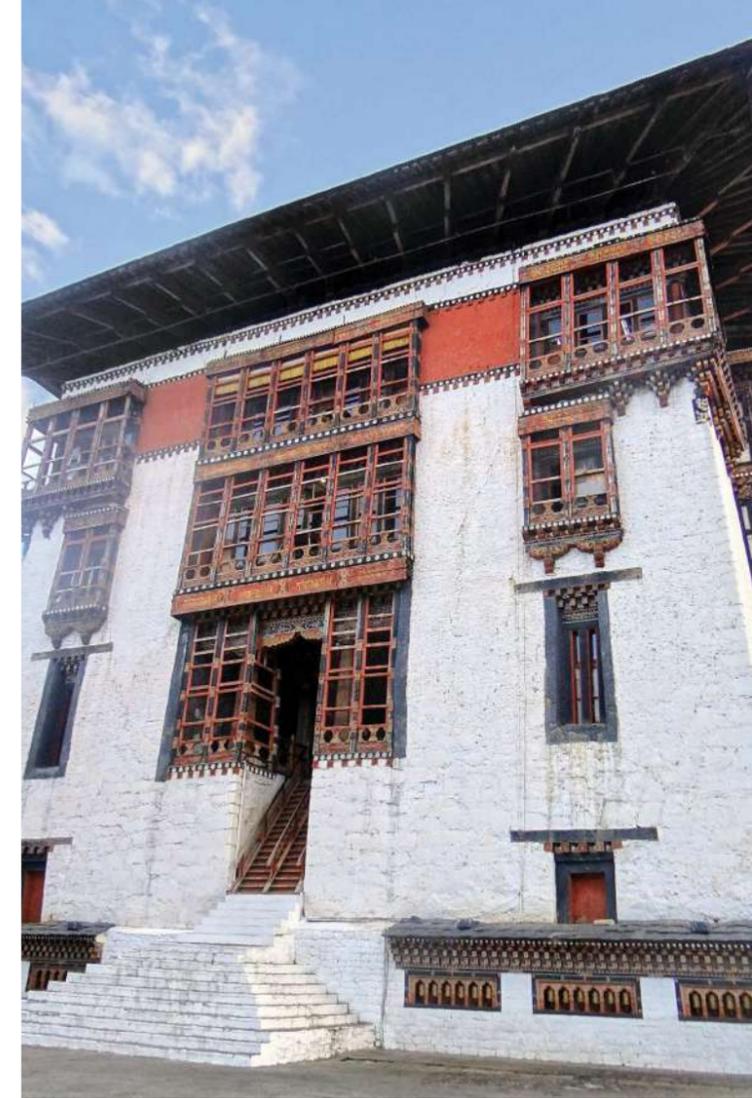
On arriving in Thimphu, the capital of Bhutan, one inevitably passes through the wonderful market street. The delicate

amalgamation of old and new buildings bonded by traditional elements gives it a harmonious unity, one that’s very different from European streets. In this unity, there is diversity of colour, scale and an oriental quality. While the western world emphasises system and dissolves the individual, here, the individual has a unique expression, evident even in their dresses - the ‘kira’ for women and ‘gho’ for men.

In Thimphu, the facades speak through colours, patterns and symbols, all forming a characteristic culture which is organic and unique to the cities of Bhutan. The houses are introverted with small windows and a characteristic sloping roof, and the buildings are box-like and suited for the cold climate. You can also expect a regular smile and greeting, “Kuzuzangpo La” from the simple, hospitable people.

The modern buildings in Thimphu are smooth finished, RCC structures with some Bhutanese elements. But I soon came to experience their time-honoured and authentic architecture, seen in the palace temple Simtokha Dzong built in the 16th century. The stark white base is made of local stone to complement the ornate upper part that opens to the outside. The white tones of the facade change to a range of colours in the interior of the temple.





The earthy paintings on the walls, and the colourful suspended elements are all symbolic of a story and its meaning, and that is what separates the natural world from the world of art. If nature is a science, then art communicates messages, stories, meanings and world views, and architecture is one of its mediums.

So here was a structure built using local natural materials and with local techniques and sensibilities, with the purpose of protecting its place of worship and evoking spiritual experience within. The stark, rough stoned white walls complemented the upper base made of wood, which was painted with carvings and symbols. This narrated a unique contrast of raw nature with refined art.

The Tashichho Dzong was again similar in character but majestic in scale, especially against the backdrop of the mountain ranges.

This Bhutanese fortress is yet another architectural blend that is currently the homestead of the Bhutanese government. The concept of three distinctive sections - monarchy, administration and spirituality - next to the banks of the Wang Chhu river emanates as an impressive and thoughtful combination.

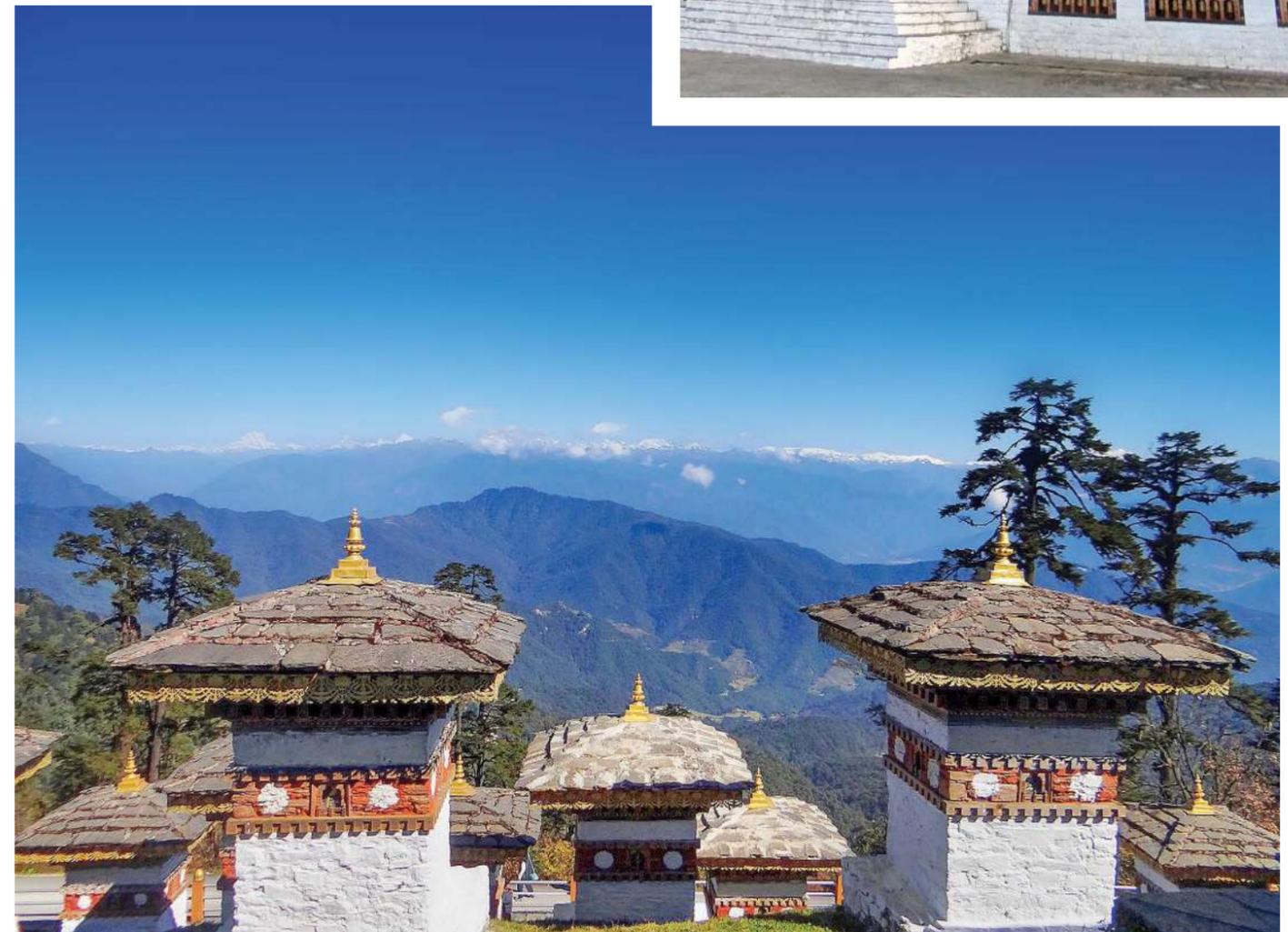
While in Thimphu, I felt the presence of a strong conservative culture that protects its values, ways and natural surroundings. It is essential for the people to be similar and that implies a subtle individual difference, something that one sees in the natural world. In a sense, the culture here is an extension of nature.

My expedition from Thimphu to Punakha via Dochula pass at 3,000 metres above sea level offered a panoramic view of the snow covered majestic Himalayas and mountain ranges of Bhutan. With 12 distinctive landscapes

depending upon the altitude, from the Alpines Steppes on the highest level to Fir and Pine forests at the middle level to sub-tropical forests at the lower level, the expansive landscapes and untouched wilderness left us overwhelmed. From this high point of Dochula Pass was a meandering road down to the town of Punakha and the wonderful Punakha Dzong that awaited us.

The first glimpse of Punakha Dzong was no less than a dramatic experience. The building sits on the confluence of the Mo Chu and Pho Chu rivers, and creates a stunning spectacle when the evening light falls on it. The walk towards it by a bridge over the river was just as dramatic as its intricate architectural elements, which began to unravel as we got closer. To get to the arrival point at a high altitude, we had to clamber over innumerable steps.

This page:
Tashichho Dzong in Thumphu
Facing page:
(Top left) Simtokha Dzong in Thimphu
(Top right) Tashichho Dzong in Thumphu
(Bottom) Fertility Temple at Dochula Pass





From the main vestibule, we entered a large court. The organisation was linear, with three courts separated by buildings between them and surrounding the structure as well. With an introverted organisation that was reminiscent of Indian temples, each court had its characteristic facade, with the last one being the most elaborate and the main entry to the temple.

Each of these Dzongs in different parts of Bhutan have peculiar characteristics of Bhutanese style, which is quite bold. The architecture that was built centuries ago was indigenous, unaltered by foreign influences, much like the territorial flora. The immediate implication for architects here, is the need to understand these local aspects and find bold characteristic ways to interpret the purpose of these buildings.

I was greatly benefited by my sojourn during the festival season here; we witnessed the traditional Bhutanese style masquerade dance, the re-enactments of Bhutan's victory over Tibet amidst the firecrackers, and the performances of battle scenes being acted out in Punakha Dzong. It is believed that the divine blessing of Paro Thongdrel, a religious image, unfolds during the festive ceremony.

As a final exploration, we made our way to the cultural icon of Bhutan - Paro Taktsang, famously known as Tiger's Nest Monastery. A revered place of pilgrimage in the Himalayan region, Tiger's Nest is an emanating rock overlooking a vast chasm, with a monastery on one side. Beneath the rock, and across the chasm from the monastery, the cliff ropes a couple of thousand feet to the canyon below. The place itself is reached

after four hours of climbing through a steep landscape, the journey alternating between tiring moments and breathtaking vistas, until finally culminating at the monastery at the top.

The culture of Bhutan is distinct and defined, its varying landscapes much like its different states with peculiar patterns that emanate from local ways and genius loci. Here, it's not about conquering, but about merging and flowing with nature. The positive vibes persuade me to quote the lines by environmental philosopher John Muir, "In every walk with nature, one receives far more than one seeks." It is here that one can be at peace, slow down and be with oneself in the wilderness. It is the last great Himalayan kingdom, shrouded in mystery and magic, where a traditional Buddhist culture is carefully orchestrating itself with the global developments. **H&DT**

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Punakha Dzong
(Facing page bottom) Tiger's Nest Monastery in Paro

