URBANIZATION IN BHUTAN

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Article:

> Bhutan has wandered without a map into that psychological territory where a magical innocence is lost and there are no signposts to what lies ahead... . The Bhutanese are in some kind of bardo [transitional state] ... waiting to see if they will enter the next life as a nation selectively modernized for the common good but otherwise unaltered, or as a small third world country.
>
> —Barbara Crossette, 1995

> Surely there must be another way to enlightenment!
>
> —Siddhartha Gautama, quoted in Karen Armstrong, 2001

Modernization's destabilizing effects frequently afflict emerging nations. Common problems evoke convergent pressures to find similar solutions. Bhutan's "middle way" development strategy offers a model for navigating competing pressures that holds promise by successfully infusing both cultural and functional elements. In this study I examine the elements that affect urbanization as the country steers internationally between isolation and absorption by powerful neighbors and domestically between an absolute monarchy and a democracy. Urban concerns flow from several common issues (Potter and others 2004). Migration to primate centers often leads to a mismatch of skills and employment opportunities, with familiar negative consequences. Population pressure exacerbates inadequate infrastructure, particularly affecting poorer parts of cities and aggravating tensions among groups. The regional problem lies in avoiding urban primacy, wherein large cities drain national resources (Pugh 1996). Sociodemographic considerations focus on how culture affects the development process. Political strategies revolve around management of these challenges, often triggering a rebalancing transition.

Sociocultural as well as political institutional characteristics shape human economic behavior and the process of development (Kasarda 1991; Yeung 2005; Radcliffe 2006). Mechanisms to cope with modernization reflect cultural roots. Their deployment in support of culturally appropriate and functionally useful steps constitutes a "middle way" of moving forward without rejecting meaningful identity roots from the past. My research examines forces that shape the formation, implementation, and emerging consequences of urbanization policy in the small Buddhist constitutional monarchy of Bhutan. The country's state of development at the edge of modernity—for the first time electing a legislature and prime minister, receiving a new king, and joining the World Trade Organization, all in 2008—creates an opportunity to monitor transition to development in a world marked by highly uneven patterns (Leinbach 1995; Smith 1996).

BHUTAN AND ITS URBAN POLICY

A challenging physical environment constrains settlement in relation to topography, climate, and land use within resource limits. Bhutan's limited amount of relatively flat land lies along river valleys between steep mountains that shape the external spatial urban morphology of all but its southernmost cities (Figure 1). These are dotted along the northern fringe of what was left of the Duar Plain in Bhutan's domain after the British extended India's northeastern boundary. Bhutan covers 47,000 square kilometers, roughly half the size of the

state of Indiana and slightly larger than Switzerland. Elevations range from 97 to 7,55o meters above sea level along the northern border with Tibet (CIA 2008). Forests cover less than three-quarters of the land, with one-tenth glaciated and slightly more than one-fifth inhabited or cultivated (Fraser, Bhattacharya, and Bhattacharya 2001) 47).

FIG. 1—Major Bhutanese urban centers, in their topographic and regional settings. (Cartography by Mayur Gosai, University of North Carolina–Greensboro, Department of Geography)

According to the first accurate, total count, as of 31 May 2005 the population of Bhutan stood at 672,425, including 37,443 people classified as temporarily unsettled. The urban population comprised 196,111 persons, or almost 31 percent of the populace. Population growth of around 3 percent per year produces one of the world's lowest density rates (OCC 2006). The smallest, basic settlement unit is a village, including isolated concentrations of several housing units clustered in relative proximity. The next largest enumeration category comprises 201 subdistricts or towns; then come 20 districts, including several villages and some towns (Rizal 2002). The hierarchic city population range reflects agricultural roots by following Zipf's rank-size distribution for urban settlements. Small landholders constitute slightly more than half of the population (Rinzin and others 2005).

The gradual pace of connection to the outside world via both virtual—television, the Internet—and physical roadways stems from a combination of topography and location in a dangerous neighborhood. Bhutan combines lessons learned—and loans obtained—from the experience of other small nations, including Denmark and Japan, with its own situation of emerging from medieval times into a modern world (Rutland 1999). Its transition is telescoped by pressures from neighbors that push its borders. Ominous rumblings emanate from Tibet, Nepal, Sikkim, and Assam. Bhutan attempts to apply a "middle way" for integrating developed-world counsel concerning modernization strategies with its own cultural understandings and patterns, charting a path that diverges in certain respects from the standard modernization formula. The four basic tenets of the intriguingly titled "Gross National Happiness" concept articulated by King Jigme Singye Wangchuk in 1972 propose building a modern nation in line with traditional Buddhist values. The concept features balanced and equitable human development in health and education, good governance—corruption free, electronically accessible, promotion by merit—cultural preservation, and environmental conservation (UNCHS 2002; Zurick 2006). Development at a sustainable pace, preserving both culture and physical resources, constitutes a key strategy (Frame 2005). To guide its assistance strategy for Bhutan the World Bank, a major lender along with

the Asian Development Bank, formulated three policy "pillars" tailored to match Gross National Happiness prerogatives: increasing access to improved infrastructure, social services, and markets—particularly powerful in deterring rural—urban migration, as discussed below —encouraging private-sector investment and employment—counteracting reliance on civil service and public-sector sustenance—and improving management of public resources applied to development. Increasing human skill capacity underlies the anticipated decentralization of settlement.

Stemming heavy and accelerating rural—urban migration flows ties urbanization policy to events in the countryside. Bhutan's Department of Agriculture suggests a somewhat unique path as it tries to improve rural life in order to address well-founded concerns about population drain. Both a Department of Agriculture study and the platform pledge of one of the two parties premiering in the first national election proposed steps to address this challenge. The production-access-market policy targets improvement of village life and local education, more market-responsive crops, and access to roads in order to improve rural livelihood and retention. Improving educational opportunities, primarily an activity of young males, ranks as the top migration motivator in one study (Rinzin and others 2005). Another study found that "family move" was the top pull for female migration, with "employment" as the second most frequently cited motivator for urban migration (IPE 2006, 21). Attempts to mute the pull of cities in western Bhutan include promoting "alternate urban centers" close to areas with the greatest population loss and in commercially more viable settings. The education-induced migration pull reflects the desire for government jobs, positions at the pinnacle of the highly subsidized public sector that pay well. Half of the workers in the largest city and capital, Thimphu—and 44 percent in Phuntsholing, the second-largest city—occupy civil service jobs, the main employment aspiration in Bhutan (Rinzin and others 2005).

Efforts to expand and/or relocate villages into new towns, intervening opportunities for population absorption, can be seen in the rise of Khuruthang, connected by a bridge to its agricultural roots along the "Capital City Belt" between Thimphu and Punakha (Rinzin and others 2005) (Figure 2). Before Thimphu exploded with development as the post-196os capital of Bhutan, Punakha functioned as an important capital city, combining, in traditional Bhutanese fashion, functions as a *dzong* (a religious, secular, and military fortress-monastery). Constructed 4 kilometers south of Punakha in response to floods in the 196os, Khuruthang absorbed the retail section of the former capital in 1999. A regional vocational training institute helps attract migrants to this sterile settlement, a midsize town. Khuruthang exhibits symptoms of bureaucratic planning responding to top-down initiatives. Unlike an organic settlement, its streets run in straight lines. Concrete buildings combine inexpensive construction with elements of mandated Bhutanese architecture as superfluous touches. Stores lining the highway feature goods, shopkeepers, and little movement.

Gelephu lies on the Indian border in the middle of the east–west line between Bhutan's borders. Although the traditional commercial center of Phuntsoling's infrastructural connections with Thimphu and India feed its bustling commercial activity, Gelephu's midcountry location holds promise for future development as an airport and/or a major land transportation depot for exports (see Figure 1). Formerly landless Bhutanese are repopulating rural land in this region, land whose former occupants were deemed of unsuitable political loyalty. Their products, and those of manufacturing and extraction industries currently encouraged to locate along the southern border, may feed rapid growth of Gelephu as a new center of decentralized development.

At this stage of transition urban areas generate only a small fraction of Bhutan's income. The country's major economic strength currently lies in exporting hydroelectric power to India; it provides 12 percent of gross domestic product and 45 percent of national revenue (ADB 2008). Subsistence agriculture forms 4o percent of the economy, employing 87 percent of the populace (UNCHS 2002). In urban areas, primary school enrollment of girls exceeds that of boys, perhaps reflecting the tendency for female inheritance of property in a slightly matrilineal society (World Bank 2006). Development of infrastructure by funding road construction, management capacity, and civil services in ten second-level towns—in addition to the two major cities of Thimphu and Phuntsholing—is a major focus of loans by international nongovernmental organizations. Income inequality between towns and rural areas in Bhutan falls in the intermediate range for South Asia (UNDP 2002).

Overall, the Bhutanese quality of life has improved steadily over the last forty years, accelerating as global integration has increased (Table I).

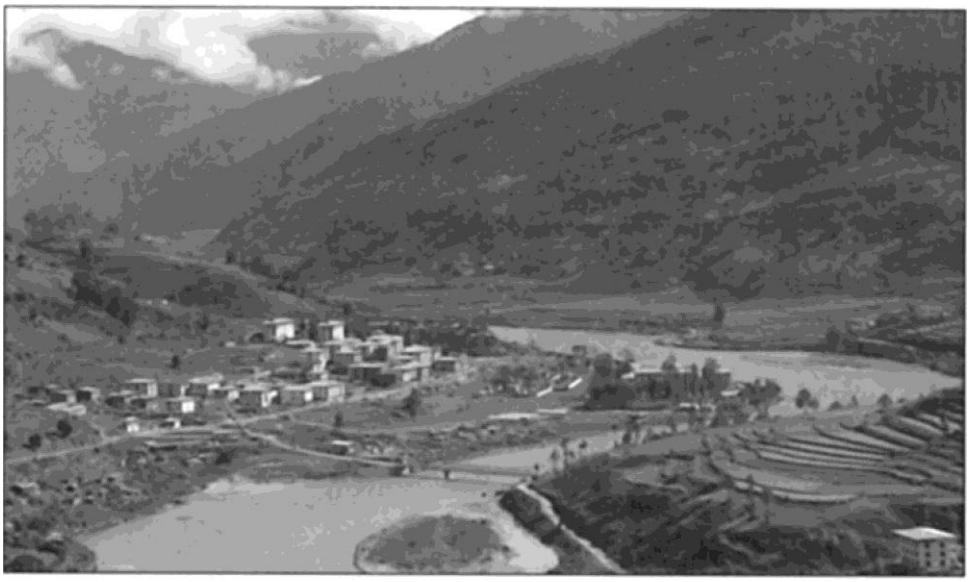

FIG. 2—In Bhutan's Punakha Valley, the planned city of Khuruthang lies on the main highway, connected by a bridge to the agricultural countryside. (Photograph by the author, summer 2006)

Bhutan's National Urbanization Strategy predicts that during the two decades between the years 2000-2020 the nation's urban populace will quadruple to half of the total population (IPE 2006). Scarcity of available land with appropriate infrastructure complicates this rapid urbanization rate, a typical developing-country scenario exacerbated by topographic extremes. Major objectives of urban planning enunciated in the urbanization report highlight improving "the well-being of poor urban citizens," maintaining environmental sustainability, balancing regional urban growth, and embracing "the local culture and values" (p. to). Total settled areas, according to the 2005 census, include sixty-one towns, ranging in population from 79, 185 (Thimphu) to 35 (Yalang, in southeastern Bhutan) (OCC 2005). A minimum of 1,500 persons was required to classify an area as urban, reducing the total to about 3o percent of the national populace, or twenty-five of the sixty-one census towns. Fully 4o percent of the entire urban population lies in the two largest towns. The net urban migrants total come to 47 percent of the urban population, including long-term urban residents in a country with a formerly very high proportion of rural settlement. Urbanization levels across the kingdom range from 65 percent of the total urban population in western Bhutan, to 16 percent in the eastern section. The central region, with 19 percent of the urban populace, is losing population through out-migration, principally to the large towns in both ends of the country (IPE 2006, 18).

TABLE I—MEASUREMENTS OF BHUTAN'S DEVELOPMENT

INDICATOR	1977	1995	2005
Birthrate per 1,000 people	43.6	39.9	20
Death rate per 1,000 people	20.5	9.1	7.0
Life expectancy, in years	46.1	66.1	64
Number of deaths below the age of five, per 1,000 births	162	96.9	29
Number of hospitals	10	28	29
Number of basic health units	31	145	176
Number of K–12 students	14,553	100,189	141,388
Number of tertiary students	866	2,004	4,429
Number of teachers	922	2,785	4,604
Adult literacy rate	17.5%	54%	59.5%
Number of telephones	N/A	9,314	32,709
Population			634,982

Sources: Rutland 1999; OCC 2006; World Bank 2006.

The gradual construction of a road network primarily serves the urban population and economic uses, from the sole airport in Paro to nearby Thimphu and Phuntsholing. The government recognizes the importance of roads for improving connectivity, but the impetus to build them in an ecologically careful and inexpensive manner leads to painstakingly slow, largely manual labor by Indian work teams, under Indian supervision, delaying the development of domestic trade routes. Despite some discussion of Bhutan's becoming a major trade route between India and China, security concerns and construction costs currently preclude this option. The impact of tourism remains highly concentrated in the capital region. Paro and Thimphu accounted for 57 percent of bed nights in 2006, with Punakha and Wangduephodrang (half a day away) at 21 percent. The top five hotels, all of which are in Paro or Thimphu, captured 31 percent of total hotel revenues (Department of Tourism 2006). This reflects both the condition of the road network and capital investments by entrepreneurs.

THIMPHU IN TRANSITION

At the time of its establishment in 1952 as the official capital of Bhutan, Thimphu's settlement centered on an imposing dzong that dates back several centuries. The selection of Thimphu represented a compromise among traditional warlord strongholds in three major areas of the country. Housing was concentrated in scattered villages close to the monastery-fort structure in a medieval relationship. Thimphu began to take shape as a fully functioning city in the 196os, aided by Indian planners and funding. Following British practices, a 4o5-hectare plot was divided into areas for residences, schools, a modern hospital—along with a center for traditional medi cine center—and a retail service strip. In a manner that became typical of the provision of electricity in Bhutan, Indian engineers installed a small hydroelectric facility at the edge of the city to supply its needs (Karan 1967). A building boom in the 198os accelerated in the 1990s, with services to support the relatively wealthy government employees and business class, including a public pool, a movie theater, coffee shops, and Western cafés (Pommeret 2006). Since 2003 Thimphu has functioned as an autonomous town under the authority of the Thimphu City Corporation.

FIG. 3—Traffic-control police at work in center of Thimphu, Bhutan. The capital city has no traffic lights. (Photograph by the author, March 2007)

More than half of all vehicles in Bhutan cruise Thimphu's streets, which were widened, extended, and paved in preparation for the November 2008 coronation of King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck. Vehicular traffic remains sparse, particularly compared with the polyglot snarls in neighboring countries. Traffic lights installed in downtown Thimphu were quickly removed by command of the king, due to his concern about the average person's unfamiliarity with the color-coded system. As a result, Thimphu remains the only capital city in the world where traffic is directed solely by policemen (Figure 3). Inexpensive public buses ply main routes and housing concentrations, complemented by taxis and motorcycles until the desired commute vehicle can be

purchased. The growing preference for status automobiles also reflects an allocation of income between residences and vehicles. The growing presence of a middle class that can afford to make such decisions signals that development is beginning to succeed. My GIS-based analysis of how well bus routes serve the populace indicated that few pockets are beyond walking distance. However, buses are reportedly infrequent and often delayed, discouraging ridership. School transportation for children is largely lacking, spurring peak periods of road congestion when more affluent parents deliver and pick up their offspring. Transportation services are currently under the same administration as the postal service, a grouping that is predicted to split as the newly elected government seeks to modernize and rationalize urban structures for a more demanding constituency.

Foreign consultants, such as the authors of Bhutan's National Urbanization Strategy and Thimphu City Development Strategy and the Thimphu Structural Plan 2002-2027 provide advice (MWHS 2004; IPE 2006). These blueprints for growth attempt to combine Eurocentric models with native sensibilities. The Thimphu Structural Plan (TSP), overseen by an American planning consultant now an expatriate in India, incorporates notions that planners term "intelligent urbanism?' These concepts bear great similarity to familiar "smart growth" plans, such as clustered, densely occupied village-type nodal neighborhoods within the larger city, connected by public transportation. Western planning principles enshrined within the TSP assign key urban roles for traditional political religious sites. The most important dzong seat of traditional power remains Tashichodzong in Thimphu, which along, with particular *chortens* (several-storied structures containing commemorative objects) continue to comprise the ceremonial centers of the city. A joint venture with India's most prestigious hotel chain produced a huge hotel that dominates the center of Thimphu. The most visible foreign direct investment to date, it joins infrastructure projects as cooperative urban planning efforts with its southern neighbor, India, which is concerned with creating a strong buffer against Bhutan's northern neighbor, China.

Thimphu's strung-out morphology necessitates the integration of population centers in annexed outlying settlements, the result of overbounding policies that are typical in many parts of the world. Districts that have been subsumed into modern Thimphu preserve the hamlets' names and locations. Land "pooling" represents a major transformation in landownership. Under this government-enforced scheme registered owners of tracts in areas targeted for pooling are required to turn over up to one-third of their parcels. The sales price is set by the government, though subject to dispute, as is the suitability of land offered somewhere else as replacement for the piece "pooled." Areas acquired in the pool are earmarked by TSP plans for a variety of uses, which remain unclear to the public. Agricultural areas can become widened roads or nodal centers for new retail, educational, or other concentrated activities. Landless people, or those rendered landless by pooling, frequently receive allocations of land in southern areas that have been depopulated by disturbances. Previous unhappy people are thus resettled by grateful Bhutanese of more dependable loyalty, and population density is equalized correspondingly.

Wards or districts in the central section of Thimphu contain an estimated two-thirds of the total population (MWHS 2004). Villages recently incorporated along the populated fringes constitute other metropolitan districts. Concentrations of police, army, Indian military, and royal forces are also part of Thimphu. Temporary residential shacks of largely Indian workers can be found on steep outlying slopes and behind more prominent structures under construction. When not occupied by Indian laborers, these sheds are usually demolished upon detection—one way of discouraging migrant settlement.

Thimphu's economic pull is magnetic. Planning and guiding implementation of plans forms a major employment concentration. College graduates aim for government employment as a prize berth, for Bhutan seeks to retain and utilize its best and brightest. The sectoral nature of Thimphu's settlement pattern is most apparent in its economic districts. Services related to a concentration of population exhibit a clearly clustered pattern. Examples are the woodworking sector in a recently incorporated village east of Thimphu's core and a large "Auto City" cluster currently within the central district but slated to move to a large area that is taking shape in the southern metropolitan outskirts. Rent-subsidized housing and apartments for workers in these occupations are under construction where currently only an old village exists, close to the near-capacity sewer-

water treatment plant. Private apartment blocks offer a more attractive—and expensive—alternative to government housing, which is in short supply. Entrepreneurial ventures in the real estate as well as general business arena are encouraged.

Most obviously lacking is a manufacturing sector. An almost de rigueur element in other developing countries, manufacturing commonly absorbs migrants from rural areas and those without advanced education, but strong environmental concerns about pollution and land pressure regarding the construction of factories challenges development of this sector in Thimphu. Competition from goods produced in India, China, and other neighboring countries with low wage scales and mass-production efficiencies is heightened by high transportation costs due to the underdeveloped state of Bhutan's roads. The major problem identified in the campaign platform of the first of the two newly formed political parties is what to do about largely urban unemployed youth. In urban areas 37.5 percent of employed males are in services, whereas 51.1 percent of employed females are in industry; in rural areas 83 percent of all employment is in agriculture (NSB 2007, 46).

Housing for the lowest nonagricultural income level and for many early-stage migrants is handled in Bhutanese fashion: through extensive family social networks. Unlike areas of urban shanties in much of the developing world, Bhutan's low population density and fairly small urban population allow young migrants and unemployed or poorly paid youth to be absorbed by living with relatives until they secure a job. Moving from one relative to the next distributes the burden in a society with large families that are often spatially dispersed around the country. Although the regional vocational technical training institute is beginning to supply a number of skilled plumbers, carpenters, electricians, and similar niche occupations, the strong Bhutanese preference for desk jobs leads to an enduring reluctance to engage in the manual labor supplied by less expensive—and occasionally illegal—Nepalese and Indian migrants. This workforce also fills many domestic labor and construction jobs. Like Bhutanese "two-career couples," these migrants frequently live close to one spousal employment site or to public transportation. Domestic workers also live with their employers, so migrant labor remains below the radar. Residents of government-subsidized apartment complexes are usually from rural villages, making such housing the closest equivalent of a migrant complex.

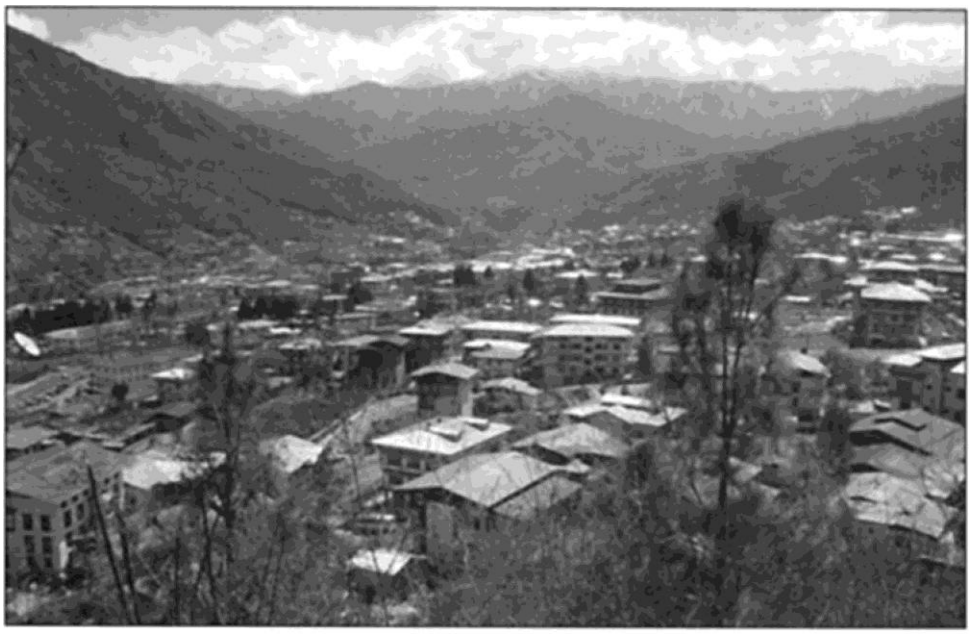

FIG. 4—Thimphu, Bhutan's capital, lies in a valley between growth boundaries. (Photograph by the author, March 2007)

Bhutan's steeply channeled physical topography imposes urban spatial morphological constraints, as do political strictures that seek to arrest environmental degradation. Some wealthy and privileged residents exceed the boundaries with new construction on county-controlled land, but a growth boundary remains visible (Figure 4). Cultural patterns explain the inability to spatially segment residents by income and occupational status. As noted earlier, many migrants rely on familial networks for a shifting boarding situation until they obtain

employment sufficient to support separate living quarters. Another complication arises from residence requirements in government-subsidized multiunit dwellings. One spouse may qualify due to a low level of pay, but the other spouse may have a well-remunerated job, leading the couple to economize on housing in favor of savings. Given cultural respect for the previous generation, single-family homes can be occupied by several generations, whose incomes range from subsistence to affluent. Cultural values contribute to the importance of building and utilizing extended social networks linked by place, family, educational, and occupational ties, all of which are needed to navigate into an uncertain future.

TABLE II—EXAMPLES OF OUTCOMES OF CONVERGENT, DIVERGENT, AND CROSSVERGENT FORCES IN BHUTAN

CONVERGENT FORCE	DIVERGENT FORCE	CROSSVERGENT SYNTHESIS
Urban migration	Production-access-market rural policy	Slow population redistribution; improved rural conditions
Foreign media	Bhutanese content	Retention of values; global awareness
Urban construction	Traditional motifs	Melding of function and form
Road building	Road maintenance by villagers	Infrastructure; group responsibility
Nongovernmental organizations with funds and advice	Gross National Happiness priorities	Bhutanese "middle way" choices
Economic improvement	Environmental concern; Gross National Happiness	Environmental sustainability
Democratization	Monarchy	A legislature; a prime minister; a "deposable" regent
Corruption	Open governance	Implementation of "clean" modernization
Increased education	Encouragement of females	Meritocracy with gender equality
Improved health	Smoking outlawed	Decreased mortality; a clean environment
Hydroelectric power developed	Small dams built	Income without degradation of the environment

COMPLETING THE "MIDDLE WAY"

The preceding study examined Bhutan's evolving responses to urbanization, a key element of modernization. Examples of outcomes from the country's "middle way" approach, combining aspects common to developing countries following the advice of developed-world donors (convergent forces) while retaining selected unique cultural elements (divergent) in a crossvergent synthesis, are detailed in Table II. Thimphu's internal urban structure falls into a sectoral division originally proposed by British-influenced Indian planners. The "intelligent urbanism" principles reinforced in the Thimphu Structural Plan (MWHS 2005), led by an American-born and -trained planner and financed by Western-dominated global development agencies such as the Asian Development Bank and the World Bank, resemble precepts of more-familiar "smart growth" proposals. Though an outcome of various convergent forces, the TSP also incorporates the physical limitations of the valley setting and divergent cultural elements.

Civil service elites, many of whom were educated in advanced countries, function in a small society knit by cross-generational familial and friendship networks. The role of the elites lies in designing crossvergent policy that preserves selected aspects of traditional culture by embodying them within modernization plans. Sociodemographic pressures come from the common problem of migration flow, which Bhutan addresses in a novel way by developing the countryside to retain population leakage. Formerly landless agriculturalists occupy areas emptied by ethnic conflict, another example of cultural political response to a common problem in development. Cultural patterns complicate analysis of settlement patterns and spatial access. Along with promulgation of Gross National Happiness precepts and exhortations to elevate concerns for happiness above material acquisitions, development in the areas of increased education, health, and earnings to promote national stability dominate planning concerns. Changes linked to global integration dawn at a pace and specification of Bhutan's choosing, but increasing connectivity remains a top priority in the move toward modernization.

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