

Margins in Motion :

*Designing with Mobility, Memory and
Care in Sikkim.*

Acknowledgements

This thesis could not have taken shape without the guidance, generosity, and solidarity of many people.

I extend my deepest thanks to Diana Ibanez Lopez, my course leader, whose sharp insight, political clarity, and unwavering care helped me shape this work from what started as a thread of questions into a grounded spatial practice.

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And finally, to the version of myself who kept returning to the page, the site, and the unresolved questions. Thank you for staying.

Abstract

Sikkim is often referred to as *Bayul Demajong*, the hidden or sacred land, a place imagined across generations as a protected, mystical space. Yet, in the everyday life of its capital, Gangtok, this sense of sacredness is troubled by silences around mobility, land, and identity. This thesis explores how a region historically framed as peripheral or invisible continues to experience exclusions shaped by land inheritance laws, infrastructural design, and bureaucratic identity regimes. These exclusions are especially acute for women, migrants, and those traversing the gaps in documentation and state recognition.

This research addresses mobility beyond transport infrastructure and places it as a relational and political inquiry around who gets to move, who is left waiting and who is structurally left behind. Set against the backdrop of Sikkim's post-monarchical, geopolitically marginal status, the study interrogates how governance frameworks, spatial planning, and symbolic narratives entrench gendered and socio-economic inequality.

Methodologically, the work draws on narrative inquiry through feminist listening, policy analysis as situated critique, and a role-based foresight method that invites participants to speculate on alternate futures. These three approaches shape grounded, scenario-based interventions addressing agro-mobility, care infrastructure, and cultural belonging.

By foregrounding lived experience and relational care, the thesis positions feminist urbanism as both a method of critique and a proposal for rethinking space. The interventions here serve not as a design fix but to surface contradictions, ask better questions, and co-imagine spatial futures with those who remain at the edges of policy and planning.

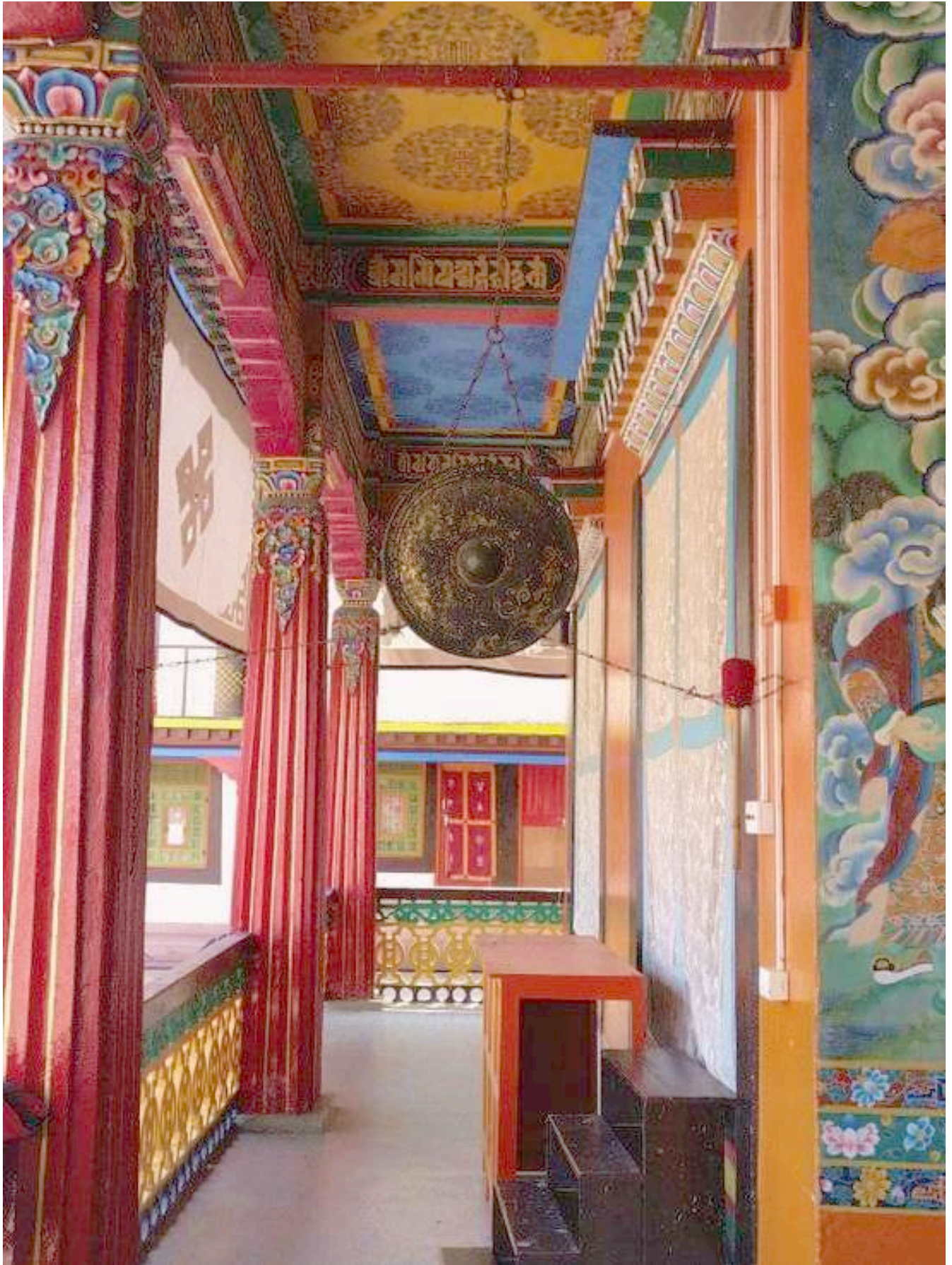


fig 1 : corridor at Rumtek Monastery

wayfinding this thesis

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ABSTRACT

01

INTRODUCTION

FRAMING SIKKIM

AIMS, OBJECTIVES, SCOPE

POLITICS OF MOVEMENT

POSITIONALITY

DOUBLE STANDARDS

MULTIPLE PERIPHERIES

02

**RESEARCH QUESTION &
FRAMING LOGICS**

03

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

DECOLONIAL THEORY

FEMINIST URBANISM

MOBILITY STUDIES

FROM FRAMEWORK TOWARDS SITUATED DESIGN

04

CONTEMPORARY DISCOURSE

REDDIT DISCUSSIONS

'WOMAN EMPOWERMENT IN SIKKIM'

DESIGN GROUNDING THROUGH MULTISCALAR TESTIMONY

05

METHODOLOGIES

NARRATIVE GROUNDING AND FEMINIST LISTENING

POLICY ANALYSIS AS SITUATED CRITIQUE

SITUATED FEMINIST FORESIGHT THROUGH ROLE-BASED SCENARIO INQUIRY

06

SPECULATIVE DESIGN INTERVENTIONS

-RUM-TECH

-CAR(E) NODES

-RE:COMMONS IN NIT

07

CONCLUSION: FEMINIST FUTURES AND SPATIAL PRAXIS

-POLICY GAP AND FEMINIST POSSIBILITIES

-PATHWAYS FOR REALISATION



fig 2 : Monastery in mist in Sikkim (Source unknown)

Introduction

Framing Sikkim

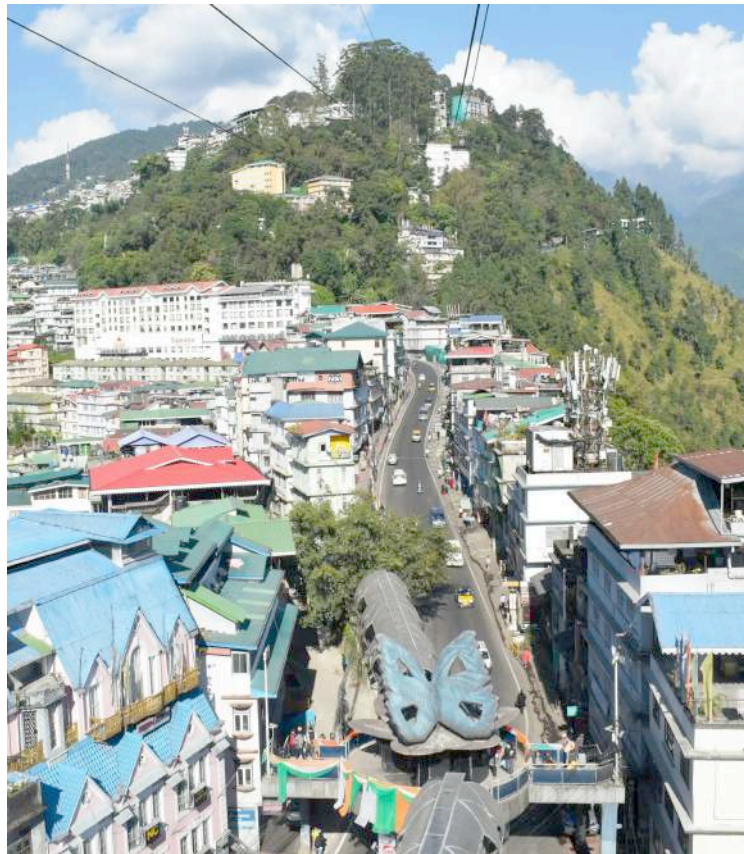


fig 3 : Aerial view of Gangtok's M.G. Marg with cable car infrastructure and central market road.

1650 m

elevation

19.3 sqkm

elevation

283,583

population

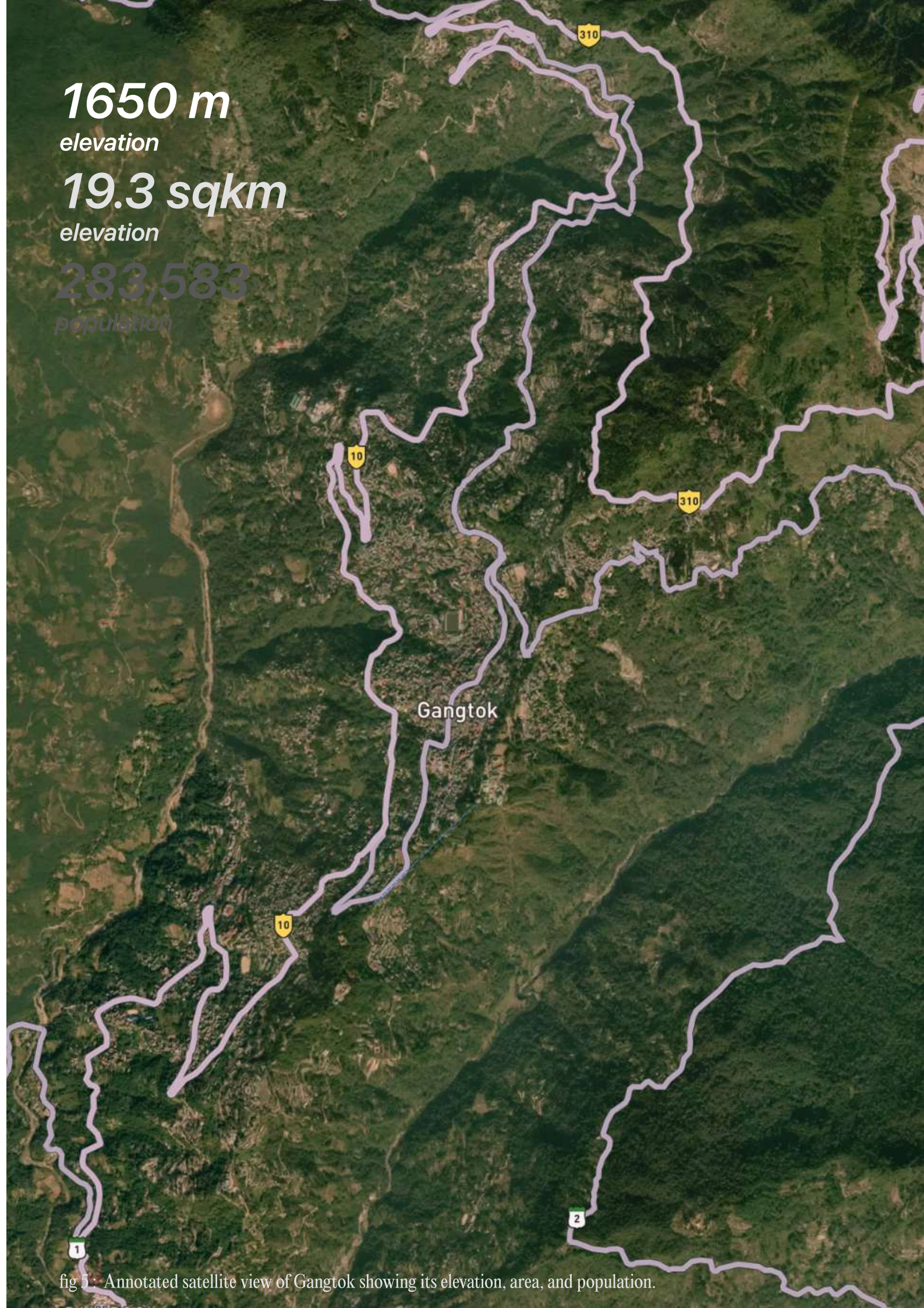


fig 5 : Annotated satellite view of Gangtok showing its elevation, area, and population.

aim

This research aims to uncover the **layered, gendered, and structural restrictions** on mobility in Gangtok, Sikkim, and to propose **spatial interventions** that challenge these exclusions through a **decolonial feminist lens**.

It positions design not as an outcome, but as a method of **inquiry**, using **narrative, foresight, and participatory role-playing** to reimagine how planning, care, and movement can be organised more justly in a peripheral hill-town context.

objectives

To critically examine how **land rights, identity laws, and infrastructural design** shape **mobility** across **gender, class, and documentation status**.

To analyse **planning frameworks and governance models** using a decolonial feminist urban lens.

To **centre lived experience** through **narrative inquiry, spatial storytelling, and participatory** methods.

To develop three **grounded, site-specific, role-playing-based design interventions** that reflect and resist current exclusions.

To explore the potential of these interventions as **spatial provocations** through **scenario-building, grounded research, and participatory foresight**, rather than through **implementation**.

scope

The study spans four interlinked analytical scales - *national, regional, urban, and embodied*, each revealing how mobility is constrained and contested in Gangtok.

It combines empirical narratives with **speculative, situated** design to produce alternative futures rooted in feminist and decolonial spatial justice.

This thesis proposes **critical, story-based design interventions** that are contextually responsive and collectively imagined.

The scope is **exploratory and interdisciplinary**, combining **urban research, policy critique, and spatial design** to foreground **care, agency, and possibility from the margins**.



the politics

These questions of - mobility, land, care, and belonging - are not abstract.

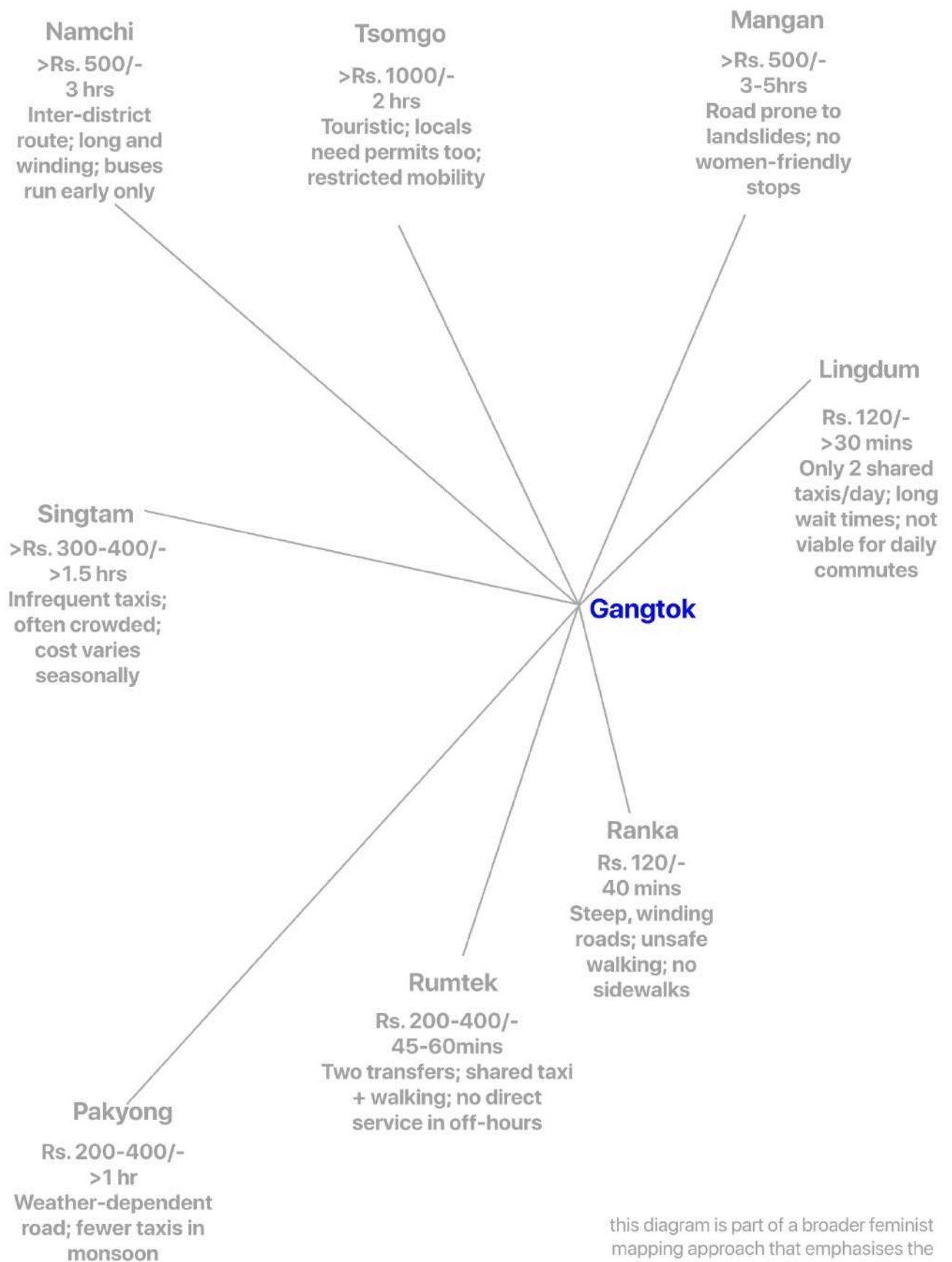
They are lived.

They manifest in who gets to access public services, who is written into policy, and who is erased from the story of the city. In a place like Gangtok, where, often, national development frameworks overlook the realities of hill-town life, mobility cannot be understood through transport plans alone. It must be traced through inheritance documents, school pickups, informal economies, and uneven footpaths.

Through these everyday traces, it becomes clear that to move, or not to, is always a political act.

(And often, a gendered one).

inter-city



this diagram is part of a broader feminist mapping approach that emphasises the overlooked realities of women's daily mobility and caregiving, which are frequently left out of the mainstream planning discourse.

Positionality

Be it enacted by the Legislature of Sikkim in the Fifty-ninth Year of the Republic of India as follows:-

Preliminary

1. Short title, extent and commencement.

- (1) This Act may be called The Sikkim Succession Act, 2008.
- (2) It extends to the whole of Sikkim.
- (3) It shall come into force on such date as the State Government may by notification in the Officer Gazette appoint and different dates may be appointed for different provision of this Act.

2. Application of the Act.

- The Act shall apply to -

- (a) any person who possesses Sikkim Subject Certificate/Certificate of Identification (COI);
- (b) descendants of Sikkim Subject Certificate holder identified through COI

Note. - A woman who has married a non- Sikkimese or has acquired foreign citizenship shall not be eligible to, enjoy the rights of descendants and heirs held as descendants under this Act.

Note. - Descendants include sons or daughters and their lineal descendants and include those as specified in Schedule I. Note how this law ties identity to marital

status, excluding Sikkimese women who marry 'outside'.

fig 6 : Screenshot of the Sikkim Succession Act, highlighting exclusionary clauses tied to (COI)

what it means to be Sikkimese

5. Sikkim Subject by Descent.

- Every person born after the commencement of this Regulation shall be a Sikkim Subject if at the time of his birth his father is a Sikkim Subject under this Regulation, whether or not the birth takes place in the territory of Sikkim.

6. Status of Women married to Sikkim Subjects.

- A woman of foreign nationality who is married to a Sikkim Subject after the commencement of this Regulation shall ordinarily be eligible to be registered as a Sikkim Subject, on making application therefor to the Government of The Chogyal in the manner provided by rules under this Regulation, and after renouncing her former nationality and on taking oath of allegiance:

Provided that the Government of The Chogyal after giving a reasonable opportunity to the person of making a representation may refuse such application.

7. Certain persons not to be Sikkim Subjects.

- (a) Any person who renounces his status as a Sikkim Subject, or voluntarily acquires the citizenship of any other country, or; takes an oath of allegiance to a foreign country or Ruler thereof without the consent of The Chogyal's Government; or
- (b) Any Sikkimese woman who marries a person who is not a Sikkim Subject; or
- (c) Any person, other than a person referred to in section 4, who severs his connection with Sikkim such as by parting with his property in Sikkim and migrates to a place outside Sikkim and India after the commencement of this Regulation, or has not been ordinarily resident in Sikkim for a continuous period of seven years, shall thereupon cease to be a Sikkim Subject.

fig 7 : Sikkim Subject Rules illustrating how identity and rights are gendered through marriage

Being Sikkimese means living in conflict between **culture** and **paperwork, land** and the **law**.

When belonging is determined by ancestral credentials as well as identification,

what does it mean to be a Sikkimese woman?

In addition to determining who can obtain employment or land, the **Sikkim Subject Certificate (SSC) and Certificate of Identification (COI)** also determine who can transfer rights to their offspring.

Despite being presented as **safeguards**, these precautions have turned into instruments of **exclusion, drawing boundaries with relationships and bodies**.

This thesis interrogates the conditionality of mobility.

Who gets to move freely? Who is allowed to stay? Who must prove their belonging in order to be spatially or legally recognised?

In Sikkim, a woman's access to property, work, and public areas is still **restricted by patriarchal norms**, which are frequently monitored by **governmental disclosure, marital status, and last name**.

This should not be accepted as official norms by its people. From what I understand and experience, it is framework for **immobility** based on gender.

Are our urban spaces being designed to serve only the documented and the privileged?

My position is **shaped** by this reality.

I am a Sikkimese woman with access to institutional venues, research tools, and design education.

Contradiction is **sharpened** by that access, it does not **solve** it.

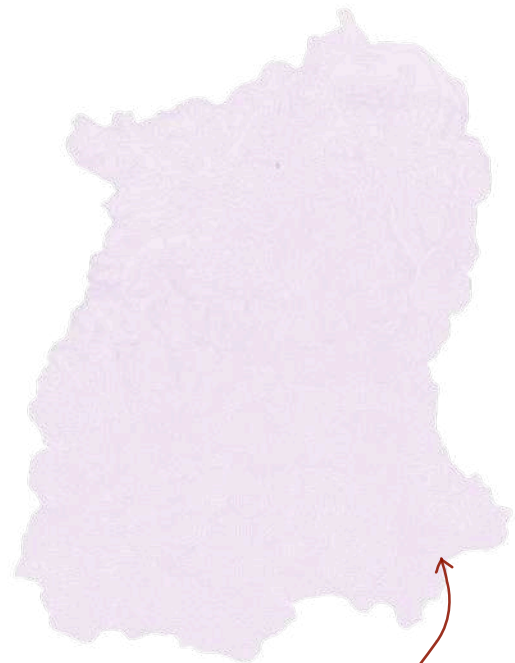
I work from **within** that tension instead of trying to **alleviate** it. My interventions are **narratively orientated, positioned, and sensitive to distance and proximity**.

Therefore, *positionality is the approach* itself, not a preface to this inquiry.

It requires me to remain uncomfortable and create from the edge for people who are destined to live there.

Discriminatory laws of the past relating to citizenship, marriage, divorce and inheritance continue to be in force even after Sikkim's merger with India. Till date Sikkimese women lose their Sikkim citizenship and property or inheritance right if they marry a non-Sikkimese. The paradox is that even in the post-merger phase a Sikkimese man does not lose his Sikkimese citizenship or inheritance right even if he marries non-Sikkimese but a Sikkimese woman loses her Sikkimese citizenship if he marries non-Sikkimese. Therefore, Sikkimese women need to be more vigilant and aware of their rights that the law of the land has conferred upon them. Specific hurdles faced by women such as legal rights of women should be immediately addressed in order to uplift the status of their rights. Upliftment in the status of legal rights of women has a domino effect on the status of their political rights. Above all Sikkimese women need to come together and create a voluntary organization or coalition to uplift the status of their legal rights. The State Government should also make conscious effort to uplift the status of legal rights of Sikkimese women by replacing the existing discriminatory laws with new laws or policies.

fig 8: Excerpt from the public opinion piece



to belong here, you
must inherit it



fig 9: Screenshot from Manch Sikkim's public discussion on "The Sikkimese Mindset" (2024).

double

Double standards in Sikkim are the architecture of its systems. They operate in the **transitional spaces** between **protection and exploitation, progress and stagnation, and policy and practice**. **Individual identity, their movement, and the state's governance** are structured through these contradictions, often normalised through **spatial, legal, and emotional compromises**.

At the centre of these contradictions is a distinct **ethical ambiguity** rooted in Sikkim's feudal past. What presents itself as peaceful coexistence is often a **social compromise**, where the desire for change coexists with **cultural complacency**.

The **slow pace of development** is accepted, sometimes celebrated, for the **continuity** it preserves.

In a 2024 public dialogue hosted by Manch, this ambivalence was clear. Locals acknowledged state failure, corruption, and ecological crisis, but repeatedly returned to the phrase: "*aba ke garne?*" ("what can we do?"). It was **resignation** rather than **indifference**.

Resistance did not follow awareness. This is the core of Sikkim's **double standards**: a public that sees but seldom speaks, and a state that promises equity while practicing selective enforcement.

On paper, policies appear to be committed to gender equity, ecological sustainability, and indigenous rights, but their implementation is riddled with **exclusions**.

Land ownership exemplifies this contradiction. Instruments like the **Sikkim Subject Certificate (SSC)** and **Certificate of Identification (COI)**, derived from **Article 371F**, ostensibly protect local rights.

In practice, these instruments are used to **restrict women's inheritance rights and control lineage**. *A woman may inherit land, but her children, if born from a non-SSC father, are excluded from property and recognition.*

Meanwhile, commercial interests bypass these protections with long leases, proxy ownership, and legal loopholes, particularly in urban areas.



standards

fig 10 : Screenshot from Manch Sikkim's public discussion on "The Sikkimese Mindset" (2024).

This reasoning is repeated in **urban development**. While supporting private infrastructure in vulnerable areas, the state, ironically encourages **sustainability**.

Gangtok develops quickly, **vertically, and frequently haphazardly**, preparing its landscape for tourism.

Sikkim is celebrated as a **"gender-progressive"** and **"clean"** state in media, yet this projection is **curated**.

Unpaid care work, property exclusions, and administrative bias are sanitised into **narratives of resilience**. The state becomes both **narrator** and **censor**, deciding *what is seen and what is forgotten*.

As a Sikkimese woman, I am **implicated** in the very systems I critique. I have access to platforms many others do not.

Yet even within this privilege, I experience the **constraints** of a state that measures **identity through certificates and belonging through marriage**.

How do I design for justice in a system where mobility itself is conditional?

Even the solutions I provide in this thesis run the risk of **replicating** the structures they want to disturb.

This is not an attempt to find answers.

It is an unwillingness to simplify.

Double standards, here are not incidental.

These are **persistent systems** that need to be consistently identified, challenged, and dismantled

Since Sikkim's 1975 merger with India, there has been a continual state of political and historical opacity that I refer to as the "muddling in."

When law, identity, and memory are intertwined, policy becomes more of a **negotiation site** than an **instrument for governance**. In Sikkim, everything is *political*.

Even quiet.

If double standards are the norm, then change starts with **clarity** and the decision to think **differently**, rather than with answers.

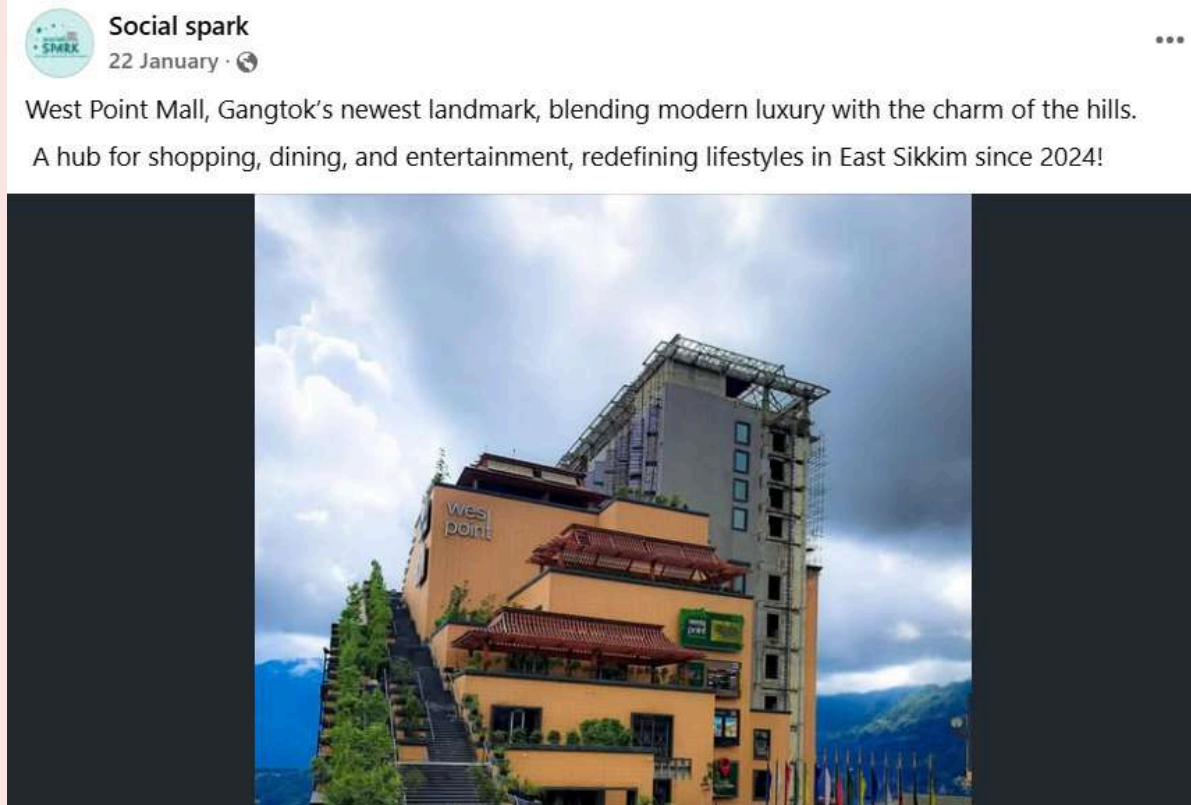


fig 11 : screenshot of a Facebook post highlighting the luxurious and vastness of the new West Point Mall

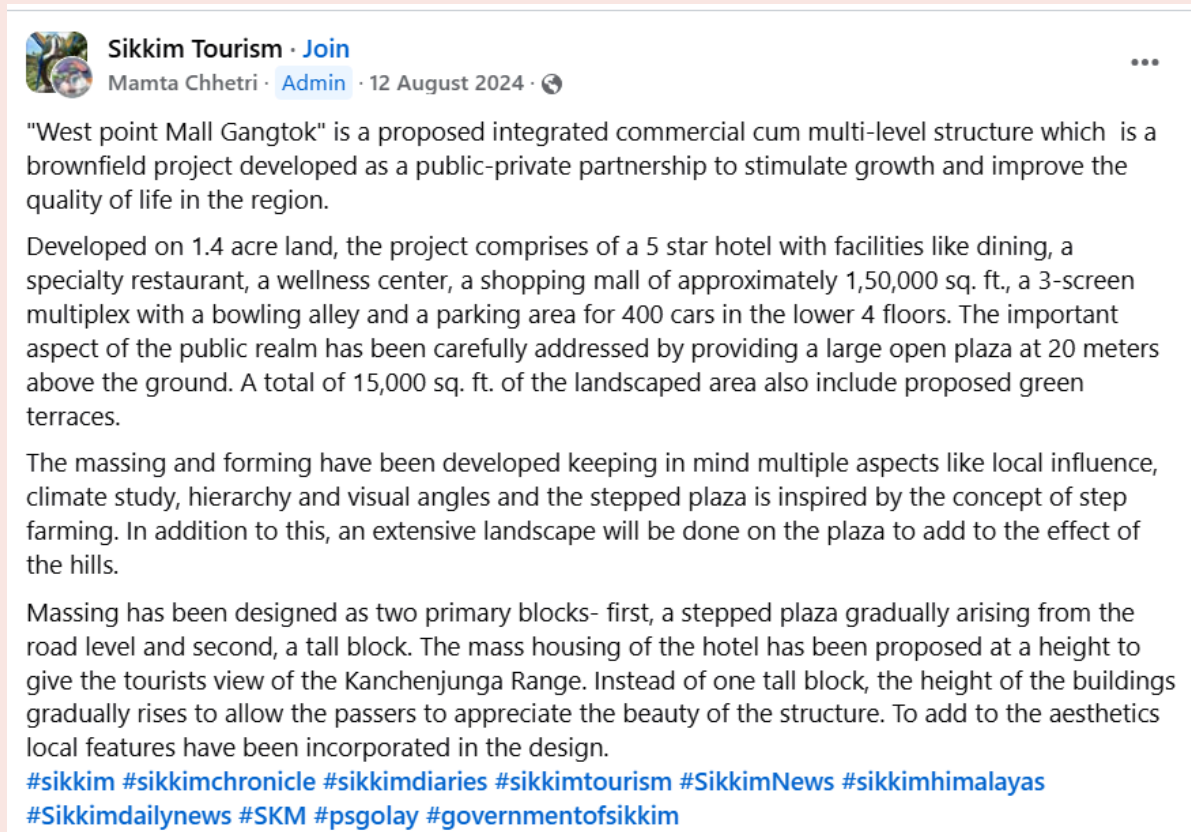


fig 12 : screenshot of a tourism page explaining the aesthetic and tourist value of the same property

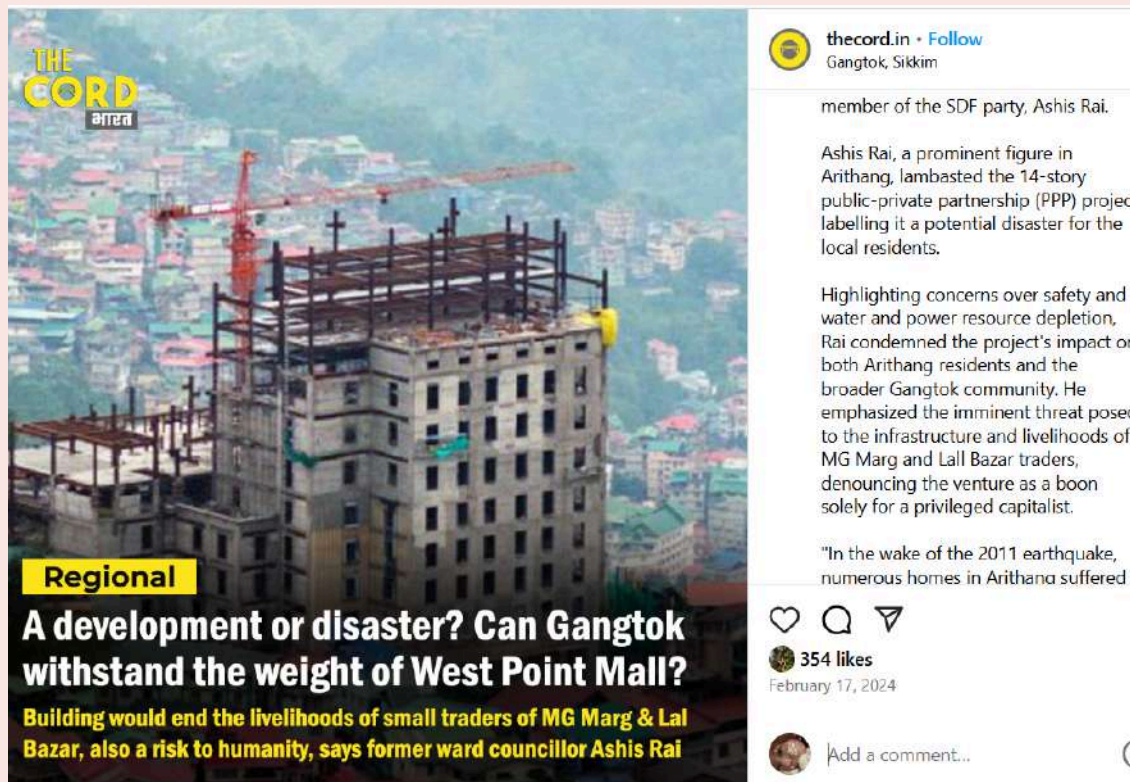


fig 13 : Instagram posts discussing public concerns and legal discourse around the West Point Mall development in Gangtok.

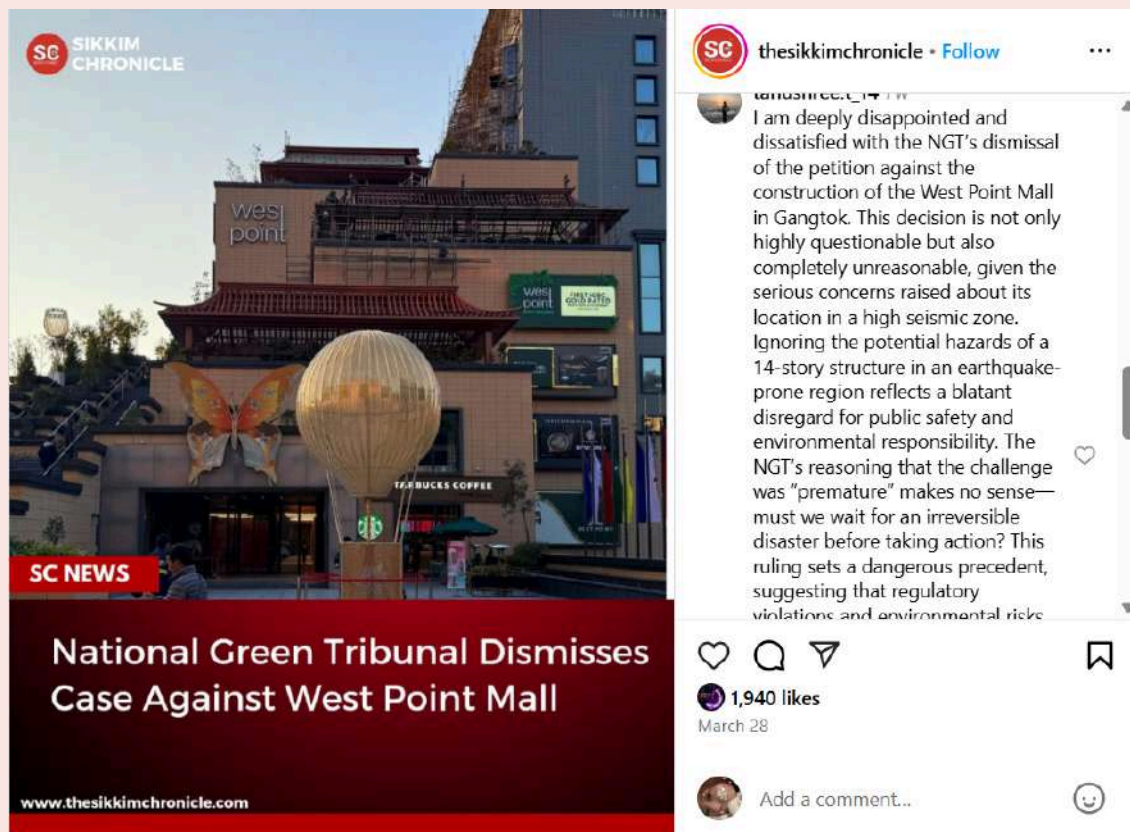


fig 14 : Social media post by The Sikkim Chronicle on the NGT's dismissal of the petition against West Point Mall.

Gangtok is a city shaped by its many edges: geographic, legal, and symbolic. As a hill town, it resists neat categorisation – too small to be treated as a city, too administratively layered to remain a village. Its steep terrain and patchwork infrastructure reflect a **deeper marginality** in national narratives, where peripheries are **physical and epistemic**. Roads remain narrow, zoning inconsistent, and infrastructure investment selective. These are manifestations of a **larger separation** between Sikkim and the centralised planning imagination.

But peripheries are not passive outcomes of remoteness. They are actively produced and sustained through policy, representation, and law.

As Doreen Massey (1994) reminds us, space is structured by power. In Gangtok, this is visible in the **invisibility** of care work, the **selective reach of development schemes**, and the persistence of **outdated legal structures** that disproportionately affect women and those without formal documentation. The gap between **policy rhetoric** and **lived infrastructure** is not an **anomaly**, but a condition of **marginality**.

Marginality is not just structural but something felt in daily life. While Gangtok is often cited as progressive in terms of gender, the realities on the ground tell a more complex story. Investment is concentrated in **visible, tourist-facing corridors** like MG Marg, while peripheral wards remain **under-served**. Policies like AMRUT and Smart City rarely move beyond branding, leaving many neighbourhoods to navigate basic infrastructure gaps on their own.

And yet, life continues. In these gaps, labour and care circulate continuously, often carried by women, migrants, and informal workers who sustain urban life. These forms of labour, so often unacknowledged in planning discourse, are the **scaffolding** of city. Federici's critique of reproductive labour is especially relevant here, entire urban systems depend on work they are not designed to support. To live in Gangtok as a woman without documentation, or as a migrant without recognition, is to occupy multiple peripheries at once. They are legal, emotional, and symbolic. These manifest as bureaucratic delays, fatigue, insecurity, and a constant sense of **not quite** belonging.

A recent national newspaper even omitted Sikkim from a map during its 50th year of statehood, a small error, perhaps, but one that reflects the **deeper erasures** people here live with. Peripheries are also where **alternate systems** and **resistances** take root. Informal collectives, shared care infrastructures, and vernacular forms of place-making point to **different possibilities**. My work is situated at what I call the *edge of the edge*, a space where **marginality is concentrated**, but also where **new spatial imaginaries** emerge.

Multiple Peripheries

fig 16: Photograph of the neighborhood of Daragaon



fig 15: Photograph of the neighborhood of Daragaon

Research Questions

How can decolonial feminist frameworks help reimagine mobility in Sikkim as a relational and embodied condition shaped by land, identity, and care, rather than merely infrastructure or access?

In what ways do capitalist and state-driven urban interventions in Gangtok produce fragmented, tourist-oriented spatial imaginaries - and how can situated, feminist counter-interventions reclaim space for marginalised communities and informal actors?

How can participatory, role-playing-based design interventions function as speculative tools of feminist urban resistance offering grounded, care-based alternatives to dominant planning paradigms in Sikkim?

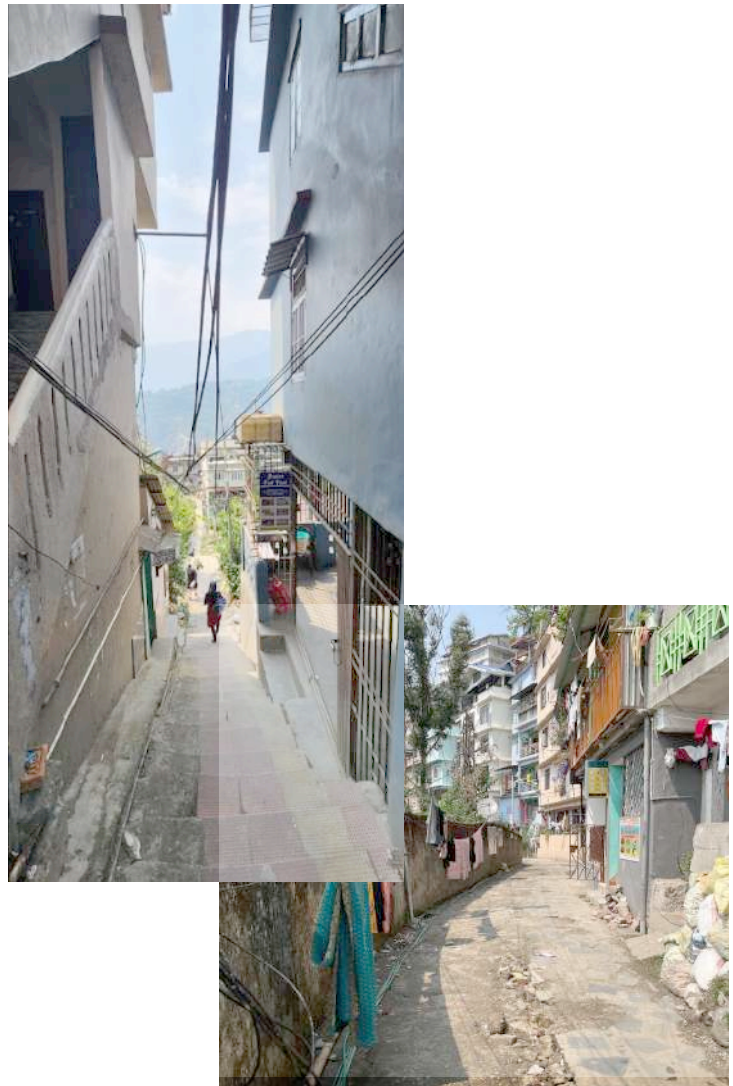


fig 17: Photograph of the neighborhood of Daragaon.

These questions build upon one another across conceptual, material, and speculative scales. The first redefines mobility through **decolonial feminist theory**, drawing from Sikkim's legal exclusions and gendered land policies. The second interrogates how **capitalist and state-led development** transforms Sikkim's urban form and symbolic identity, especially through touristification.

The third activates **feminist urbanism** as a design method introducing participatory, narrative-based interventions that imagine otherwise. Together, these questions structure the design logic of this thesis and shape its role-playing-based spatial scenarios.

Theoretical framework

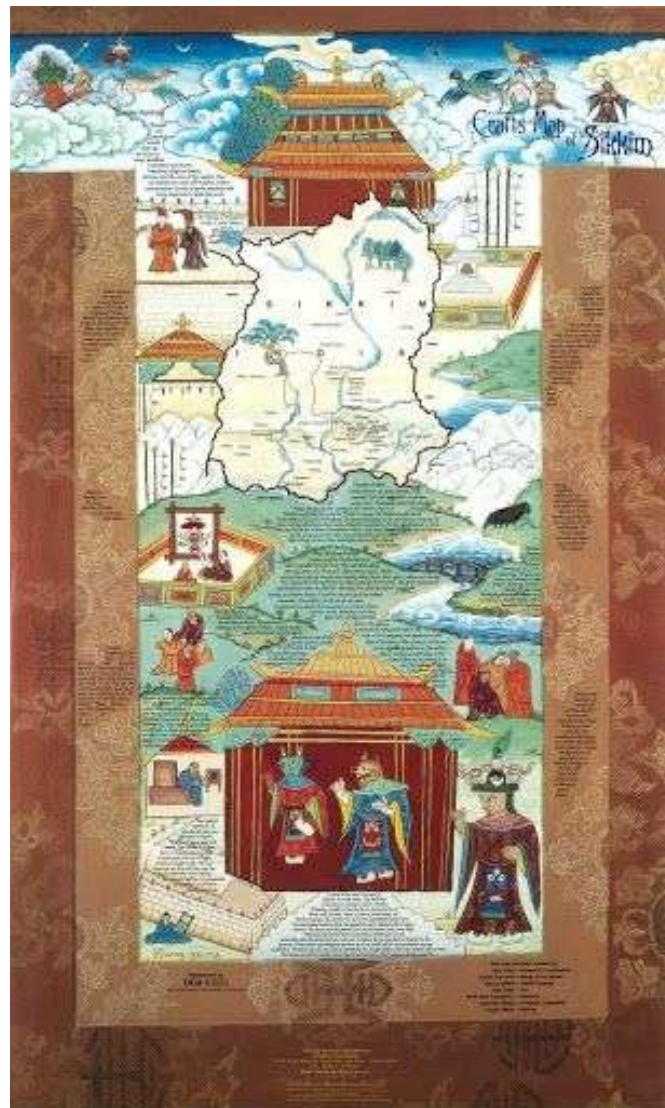


fig 18: Photograph of a thangka.

Decolonial Theory: Peripheral Knowledge, Epistemic Rupture

Sikkim, like much of the Himalayan region, exists in a liminal space. It is politically included within the Indian state, yet **epistemically excluded** from the dominant paradigms that shape urban and development discourses. This contradiction is precisely what Aníbal Quijano (2000) describes as the **coloniality of power**.

The imposition of Eurocentric rationalities on **local governance, identity, and spatial organisation**.

This colonial residue persists through administrative structures like the **Sikkim Subject Certificate (SSC) and Certificate of Identification (COI)**, which continue to govern not only citizenship and land ownership but also the movement and autonomy of Sikkimese women.

Building on this, Walter Dignolo's (2007) notion of **epistemic disobedience** provides a theoretical foundation to challenge and unlearn state-sanctioned modes of knowledge. It calls for the recognition of local and situated epistemologies as valid ways of knowing.

For this thesis, that means engaging with Sikkimese women's stories, undocumented labour practices, and informal infrastructures as legitimate sites of knowledge, often excluded from state archives or formal academic discourse.

Scholarship by Arturo Escobar (2008) further strengthens this by proposing **pluriversal design**, which means planning not as technocratic solutionism but as a culturally situated, participatory act.

In the Eastern Himalayan context, this resonates with the work of T.B. Subba and Mahendra P. Lama, whose writings emphasise how Northeast India, including Sikkim, has been governed through **frameworks shaped by national security and extractive development agendas** rather than care, community, or autonomy.

Recent work, such as Dominic Loomes' (2024) **Decolonising Tibetan and Himalayan Studies**, calls for serious engagement with Himalayan intellectual traditions, including **Buddhist epistemologies and indigenous spatial practices**. While this thesis does **not** explicitly adopt religious cosmologies, the idea of **cross-world ontologies** helps reframe mobility beyond physical access.

Instead, mobility becomes about participation in the making of knowledge, memory, and belonging.

This epistemic shift from **extractive development** to **situated co-creation** underpins the spatial propositions developed in this thesis.

This critique of **coloniality** speaks closely with **feminist urbanism**, particularly in how both frameworks challenge top-down systems of knowledge and spatial control, and instead foreground the importance of **relational infrastructure, and lived experience in shaping space**.

Feminist Urbanism: Care, Labour, and Spatial Justice

Urban planning has often been shaped by top-down, masculinist frameworks that ignore the realities of everyday life. As Leslie Kern (2020) argues in *Feminist City*, the city isn't a neutral space, it's shaped by conflict, care, and uneven power.

Dolores Hayden (1980) called for urban design to include spaces for **domestic labour**, asking why kitchens, childcare centres, or laundromats are still excluded from planning frameworks.

This resonates with what I've seen in Gangtok, where **broken footpaths, steep stairs, and lack of care systems** make daily mobility especially difficult for women and caregivers.

Through my fieldwork and volunteer work with *Manch Sikkim*, I've seen how this affects women first-hand, traversing steep terrain with small children, managing household responsibilities, and negotiating daily access to water. Local planners I spoke with shared frustration over zoning laws that ignore lived experience. This aligns with Silvia Federici's (2004) critique of how **reproductive labour** is made invisible, and it closely reflects the work of *Col·lectiu Punt 6* - a feminist cooperative of architects, sociologists and urban planners - whose feminist urbanism guides much of my thinking. Their work on gendered space, public transport, and participatory planning shaped my own use of narrative methods and spatial storytelling.

More recently, feminist political ecologists like Wendy Harcourt and Deepa Joshi have expanded this lens to include **environmental governance, especially in fragile ecologies**.

Although my thesis is not directly tied to ecological design, I borrow from these ideas to understand how **care, land, and infrastructure** are interconnected in Gangtok.

Joshi's research on water governance helped me notice the quiet, everyday systems women have built in response to terrain and scarcity through informal water sharing, coordinated childcare, and networks of mutual support.

These feminist critiques of spatial justice span across questions of **movement, agency, and access**, which **mobility studies** help reveal more fully.



fig 19: Photograph of the neighborhood of Daragaon

Mobility Studies: Uneven Movement, Affective Geographies

The third pillar of this framework comes from mobility studies. It aims to question who gets to move, how they move and under what conditions.

As Tim Cresswell (2006) argues, mobility is not just movement, it is a **socially produced meaning** that reveals **power**. In Gangtok, mobility is shaped by **terrain, permits, marital status, and infrastructure**. It is unequal, precarious, and gendered.

Mimi Sheller and John Urry's (2006) theory of mobility regimes articulates how systems of governance **restrict or facilitate** different types of movement beyond transport infrastructure. It influences social norms, access to decision-making, and who is considered a legitimate mover. These regimes produce uneven mobilities and end up reinforcing hierarchies of class, gender, and visibility.

In Sikkim, this can be seen in the **informality** of transport, the rising costs of shared taxis, and the structural conditions that make car ownership, and even driving, largely inaccessible for many women. This is not simply due to affordability, but also due to lack of time, poor road conditions, and spatial stressors like limited parking. The central commercial zone, MG Marg, where key economic and administrative activities are concentrated, is not only congested but also informally regulated by male-dominated youth party groups who control parking access. This creates social and psychological barriers to women's urban mobility.

Moreover, many women commute from semi-urban or rural areas to Gangtok, where government offices, hospitals, and employment centres are concentrated. These long commutes are typically made in **crammed shared taxis** and small vehicles where women must squeeze beside strangers, often compromising physical comfort and personal space.

The cumulative cost of these journeys is disproportionately borne by those in low-paid or informal work. The cost of these commutes, both financial and emotional, is highest for women in low-paid or informal work. Farmers, too, spend a big portion of their earnings just to access markets in town.

These structural inequalities exemplify what Doreen Massey (1994) terms **power geometries** on how space and time are experienced differently based on one's access to **mobility, infrastructure, and decision-making**. It raises critical questions around who must wait, who pays more, and who is structurally forced to adapt.



fig 20: Informal parking in MG Marg controlled by male youth.

From Framework towards Situated Design

This literature framework brings together diverse and situated strands of scholarship to ground the **Decolonial Feminist Urban Mobility Framework** that serves as a base for this thesis.

It is not a single theoretical stance, but rather a collection of provocations: **mobility regimes** draw attention to the common **patterns of exhaustion, limitation, and adaptation** that arise in Gangtok's terrain-responsive urbanism; **feminist political ecology** reframes **infrastructure and care** as **co-produced spatial conditions** of survival; and **coloniality of power** becomes a method to **question** the **legal structures** and **land regimes** that condition mobility.

This framework privileges uncertainty, proximity, and the politics of care. It insists on remaining accountable to the **Sikkimese context**, from its specific histories and legal instruments to the embodied stories of those experiencing exclusion and precarity.

It is positional and resists universal categories, drawing instead from place-based ways of knowing that emerge at the intersection of survival and spatial exclusion.

It functions more as a **situated practice** of careful preparation than it does as a solution to a specific problem. It is an attempt to transcend critique and explore **modes of resistance** that are spatial, relational, and imaginative.

Contemporary Discourses

This chapter situates the thesis within ongoing discourses around gender and mobility in Sikkim, as expressed through digital media, state-produced narratives, and everyday experience. This discourse does not rely on **academic or policy literature**. It foregrounds informal and vernacular knowledge, exposing tensions between **cultural identity, legal structures, and embodied movement**.

From Reddit discussions to tourism rhetoric, from infrastructural fatigue to survey-based insights, these discourses reveal how mobility is imagined, regulated, and experienced in contradictory ways.

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Chapter 1: Public Sentiments and Online Forumss

To examine everyday negotiations of gender and mobility, I turned to Reddit, a digital space where anonymity enables **candid expression of local anxieties and values**. In a thread I initiated on the "Sikkim" subreddit, I posed a question:

Should Sikkimese women retain land rights after marrying non-Sikkimese men?

The responses revealed aspects of a public psyche that struggles between cultural preservation and gender equity.

Many defended the restrictions on inheritance through **protectionist logic, invoking demographic control**. Others expressed **unease** with the inequality but hesitated to **imagine alternatives** that wouldn't risk perceived cultural dilution. Few respondents questioned the patriarchal assumptions underpinning these laws. One remark stood out: "It's a small sacrifice for the greater good." This framing positions women as cultural symbols rather than full citizens, asked to protect tradition while **forfeiting** their own rights.

This digital exchange offers **no consensus** but instead functions as a **diagnostic site**, revealing what I term the *muddling in* of bureaucratic logic, cultural anxiety, and gendered expectations. These relationships mirror tensions I've experienced personally within family, through state documents, and in everyday mobility. They also emphasise how discourse sustains **exclusions** under the guise of **cultural protection**.

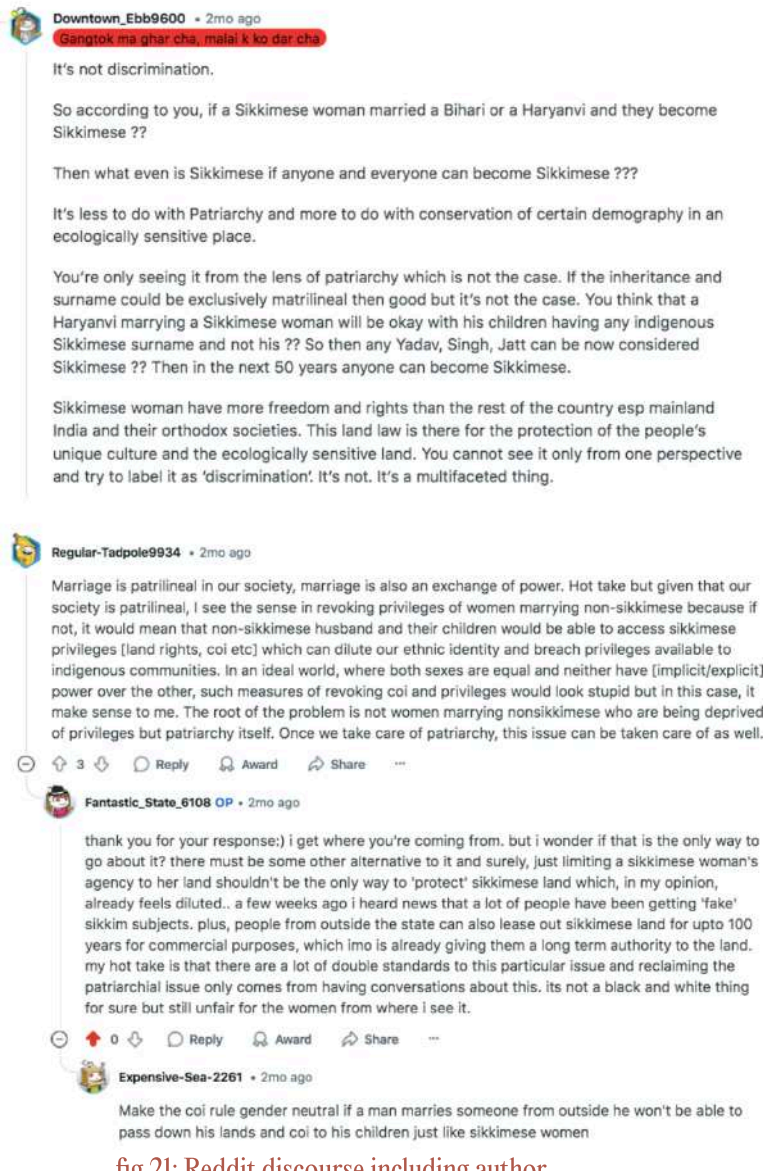


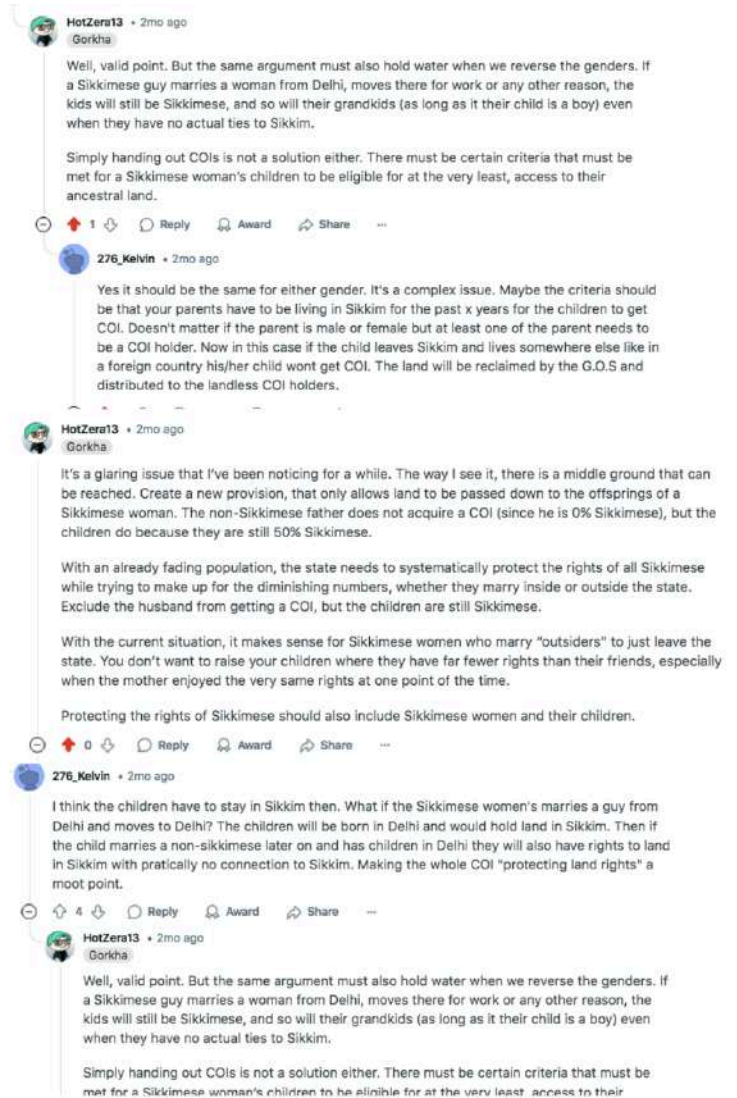
fig 21: Reddit discourse including author

Chapter 2: Gender Equality as State Performance

Where public forums reveal **ambivalence**, state narratives present **hyper-coherence**.

The Sikkim government's tourism site features an article titled "*Women Empowerment in Sikkim*," saturated with visual and textual tropes of **harmony, joy, and celebration**.

Journalism like this portray an *idealised narrative*, completely detached from the structural barriers women face around land, mobility, and legal identity. This curated narrative serves as branding, an affective tool aligned with **economic growth, touristic appeal, and state legitimacy**. It erases the gendered exclusions perpetuated by land inheritance laws, zoning schemes, and bureaucratic thresholds like the SSC and COI.



By presenting equality as a **completed project**, the state narrative forecloses the possibility of critique. These promotional discourses are overwriting lived experiences rather than complementing them. When contrasted with survey data, fieldwork, and everyday testimony, they appear not merely inaccurate but **complicit**, sustaining **inequity** by rendering it **invisible**. These contradictions demand response, and the design interventions in the thesis serve as **counter-narratives** grounded in material life rather than symbolic celebration.



fig 22: Screenshot of an article on “woman Empowerment” by Sikkim Tourism, edited and redacted by author

Reading Mobility across scales

This literature framework brings together diverse and situated strands of scholarship to ground the Decolonial Feminist Urban Mobility Framework that serves as a base for this thesis. It is not a single theoretical stance, but rather a collection of provocations: mobility regimes draw attention to the common patterns of exhaustion, limitation, and adaptation that arise in Gangtok's terrain-responsive urbanism; feminist political ecology reframes infrastructure and care as co-produced spatial conditions of survival; and coloniality of power becomes a method to question the legal structures and land regimes that condition mobility. This framework privileges uncertainty, proximity, and the politics of care. It insists on remaining accountable to the Sikkimese context, from its specific histories and legal instruments to the embodied stories of those experiencing exclusion and precarity.

1. National Scale: Law, Identity, and the Gendered State

Legal instruments such as the SSC and COI function both as bureaucratic tools and spatial regulators. They govern access to **land, jobs, resources, and recognition**. Article 371F frames these structures as **protective**, yet they often exclude women from land transmission if they marry outside designated categories. **Belonging** becomes legalised and gendered, tied to bloodlines, marriage, and inheritance.

2. Regional Scale: Infrastructural Fragility and Rural-Urban Disconnect

Regional mobility is limited by risk and distance, especially between Gangtok and the nearby settlements. Roads are nevertheless susceptible to seasonal instability and landslides. Despite being essential, shared cabs are unreliable and expensive. Women who do not drive are particularly vulnerable since they must balance market employment, domestic chores, and caregiving duties.

These issues are directly reflected in this thesis's first design intervention, *Rum-Tech*, which proposes a **decentralised agro-mobility node** to reduce the spatial and economic burden of such travel, making visible the link between mobility, care work, and regional accessibility.

3. Urban Scale: Governance, Zoning, and Infrastructural Absences

Zoning priorities in Gangtok prioritise **institutional** and **commercial** growth over infrastructure for caregiving. Accessible sidewalks, restrooms, and childcare facilities are either lacking or dispersed. The flow of traffic takes precedence over pedestrian safety, and street lighting is erratic. Planners' and residents' survey responses criticise this unequal investment. Feminist urbanism maintains it is not architectural defects but political decisions which determine movements that are hidden and the ones that are envisioned.

4. Spatial Scale: Movement, Daily Rhythms, and Emotional Geographies

This last scale addresses how the body experiences movement. Decisions about where and when to travel in Gangtok are influenced by congested walkways, and steep climbs. Emotional and strategic mobility is determined by social risk, resource accessibility, and physical ability.

It connects everyday movement, pauses, and gestures to broader aspects of **rest, adaptation, surveillance or visibility**. Gendered experiences shape how space is **claimed, avoided, or endured**.

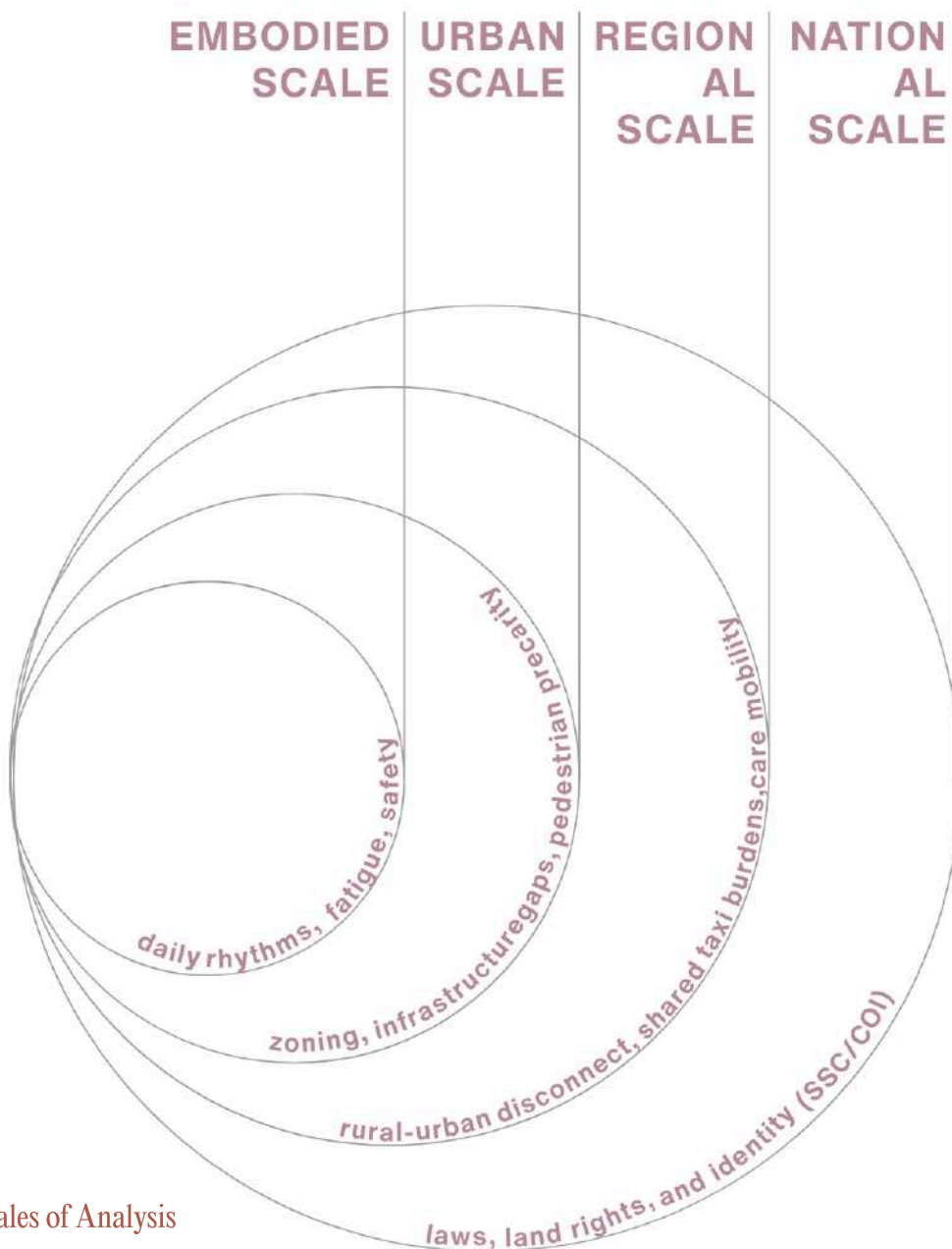


fig 23: Scales of Analysis

Local Testimonies as Design Groundwork

To further anchor this analysis, I conducted open-ended surveys with residents in and around Gangtok. Their responses show the **systemic nature** of infrastructural and policy-related immobility.

Across diverse respondents from different professional fields, common themes emerged: **frustration** with inaccessible public transport, **exclusion** from planning processes, **lack** of open, green spaces and **fatigue** from navigating care responsibilities without state support.

These answers demonstrate how development still follows top-down logics, frequently excluding informal workers, local architects, and inhabitants without legal status.

I treat these responses as co-theorists rather than using these responses as passive data points, shaping the spatial design interventions that follow. Their insights are embedded into the **speculative scenarios** in this thesis as responsive propositions to lived realities.

These contradictions directly inform the design logic of this thesis as tensions to be **held, challenged, and reimaged** through situated, feminist design.

Methodologies

Narrative Grounding and Feminist Listening

This thesis uses storytelling as a way to listen to everyday contradictions, silences, and emotional realities in Sikkim. State narratives often project gender equality, yet the lived experiences of Sikkimese women tell a more complex story. I turned to narrative inquiry as a feminist method because it helps reveal how power, mobility, and care are felt in relational and affective ways. This approach draws from scholars like Richa Nagar (2014), who frames storytelling as **co-theorising** with marginalised voices, and Laurel Richardson (1990), who sees narrative as both **method** and **meaning**. Bell Hooks and Chandra Talpade Mohanty also inform this perspective, as they emphasise feminist knowledge rooted in lived, situated experience.

I held a series of informal conversations with Sikkimese women across generations, school friends, diaspora peers, aunts, and elders. Each offered partial and personal reflections on **land, documentation, social expectations, and movement**. A recurring thread was the quiet assumption that daughters would eventually belong elsewhere.

Women spoke of caregiving, adjustment, and displacement as **inherited** responsibilities, even in the absence of overt discrimination.

Many also voiced frustration about the lack of stable jobs in the state and barriers to financial independence.

Rather than transcribe these stories in full, I allowed them to shape the **conceptual foundation** of my interventions, particularly in the design of the role-playing-based scenarios. The themes of exhaustion, resilience, and constraint structured how I imagined urban life and care infrastructure in Gangtok.

These narratives were not translated into fixed personas but **guided** the emotional and spatial tone of each scenario.

Drawing from Donna Haraway's (1988) idea of situated knowledge, these stories aren't meant to be representative or complete. They are partial, located, and emotional. As Richardson (1990) argues, "narrative is the method and the phenomenon."

Here, storytelling is a form of feminist theorising that honours **proximity, complexity, and relational insight**. It becomes a decolonial practice when it makes space for voices and feelings that planning frameworks often erase.

This method directly informed the structure and depth of the three design interventions that follow.

Each scenario developed from the real-life events that were shared with me, as opposed to having fictional characters. The interventions reflect the everyday emotional labour and quiet resistance embedded in women's stories. Based on compassion, trust, and a reluctance to reduce lived experiences to technocratic fixes, narrative listening evolved into the first act of design.

This matters because it anchors the thesis in a feminist epistemology that centres embodied knowledge over abstraction. By grounding design in **lived testimony**, this method exposes the limitations of dominant policy narratives and **legitimises** the everyday as a site of spatial insight. It establishes the critical foundation from which the following speculative interventions emerge.

Policy Analysis as Situated Critique

This second method approaches policy analysis as a form of **situated critique**. Drawing on Carol Bacchi's (2009) question, "What is the problem represented to be?", I examined how state policies in Sikkim frame mobility, care, gender, and space, both through what they address and what they omit.

While many policies appear neutral or technical, they often reinforce deep-rooted exclusions. I focused on how these framings play out in everyday life, especially for women and informal workers. During this research (April, 2024), I volunteered with *Manch Sikkim*, a civic collective of architects and planners advocating for more participatory urbanism. Through this work, I engaged with debates around Gangtok's traffic systems, zoning logic, and infrastructural priorities. It became clear that exclusion operates in policy content as well as in who gets to **shape** it.

Tourism-driven initiatives like **AMRUT** and the **Gangtok Smart City** plan often prioritise visibility and flow for visitors, while ignoring daily care infrastructures: pedestrian paths, shaded resting spaces, and informal markets. These projects promote aesthetics and mobility for outsiders, while neglecting those who move out of necessity, especially caregivers, pedestrians, and low-income workers.

To understand how mobility is formally governed, I reviewed planning reports, zoning policies, and employment regulations. Zoning laws tend to concentrate commercial growth while overlooking care-supporting infrastructure. Despite public campaigns led by *Manch Sikkim* (2024), basic needs like public toilets or shaded seating remain absent from formal plans.

Employment policies, meanwhile, are still mediated by documentation regimes like the Sikkim Subject Certificate (SSC) and Certificate of Identification (COI), which regulate access to public employment, housing, and benefits.

According to the Women and Men in India Report (2023), urban women's workforce participation in Sikkim remains below 19%, a figure shaped as much by policy as by social expectation.

More recent interventions like the 2024 odd-even traffic rule (The Telegraph) or the proposed 'Golden Jubilee Cable Car' (Sikkim Express, 2025) reflect a growing concern with congestion and tourism logistics.

Yet they fail to address the emotional and physical strain that characterises daily commuting for local residents. Many of these projects draw from the 2018 Comprehensive Mobility Plan, developed by a Delhi-based consultancy. The outsourcing of urban mobility planning to firms with **little embeddedness** in the Sikkimese context further reflects the disconnect between state-led development and lived experience.

This reinforces my core claim of how mobility in Sikkim is governed by frameworks where care, accessibility, and equity are consistently deprioritised in favour of flow, spectacle, and investment appeal. Policy analysis, in this context, becomes a form of counter-mapping. It complements the narrative method by revealing how exclusions are built into planning systems, and where design might intervene.

This method used three core tools: a review of planning frameworks like Smart City and AMRUT, a comparison between national gender policy and local realities, and observational critique through my involvement with *Manch Sikkim*. These helped identify specific policy gaps that directly informed the spatial logic and critique embedded in the three design interventions.

By tracing how spatial exclusions are institutionalised through legal and planning structures, this method strengthens the thesis's argument that feminist urbanism must also operate as policy reimagination. It reveals how design can begin not only from gaps but from the political opportunity to challenge and recode state priorities around mobility, care, and belonging.

Situated Feminist Foresight through Role-Based Scenario Inquiry

Building on narrative and policy critique, this third method introduces an experimental, mobile approach to knowledge-making. It explores speculative, role-based scenario work as a way to ask what it might mean for mobility planning in Sikkim to emerge from lived experience and not top-down predictive models.

This approach draws from **feminist and decolonial foresight** traditions that view imagination as a political practice. It responds to the need for design tools that critique existing systems and offer ways of sensing, narrating, and planning from the margins.

Drawing on **participatory foresight** (Ramos, 2006), **feminist scenario thinking** (Murphy, 2017), and **situated speculation** (Harcourt et al., 2022), this method treats future infrastructure as a mirror for present tensions and possibilities.

Early experiments with fictional personas revealed the limitations of assigning fixed narratives. In response, the method evolved into role-based foresight grounded in three contextual prompts, each inspired by a plausible development pathway in Sikkim:

- A rural-urban agro-mobility and logistics plan
- A decentralised care infrastructure initiative
- A tourism-led urban transformation in Gangtok

These prompts were derived from existing planning language and state development priorities. They were designed to reflect and challenge current governance logics around growth and access.

Participants were assigned one of seven roles - including domestic migrant, middle-aged mother, taxi driver, social welfare minister, tourism minister, street vendor, and young farmer - and asked to respond via a structured Google Form.

Feminist foresight in this thesis is a method of care, attentiveness, and imagination. It centres contradiction and relational complexity over certainty. This method challenges planning paradigms that prioritise speed, scale, or spectacle, proposing instead a form of spatial inquiry that listens first and designs from what is felt and feared.

This method also positions the design scenarios as performative tools of critique: ways of testing, queering, and unsettling dominant planning logics. They do not offer definitive solutions, but embodied provocations that surface affective tensions, reframe power, and propose alternate political imaginaries. In doing so, they advance this thesis's claim that feminist spatial practice actively designs against exclusion.



fig 24: Daragaon neighborhood

Transition to Design Interventions

The three methods, narrative inquiry, policy analysis, and role-based feminist foresight, form a layered research process grounded in everyday experience, institutional critique, and collective imagination. Together, they help surface how mobility in Sikkim is structured through intersecting forces of gendered care labour, legal exclusions, and development logics that often bypass local realities. The design interventions that follow respond directly to these conditions through spatial propositions rooted in lived experience.

Each intervention engages with a different context - rural infrastructure and economic mobility, neighbourhood caregiving and zoning, and institutional access to cultural memory.

They are speculative tools that perform critique through spatial storytelling. As feminist interventions, they test what infrastructures might emerge when policy gaps are confronted with lived contradictions.

Speculative Design Interventions



fig 25: landscape in North Sikkim

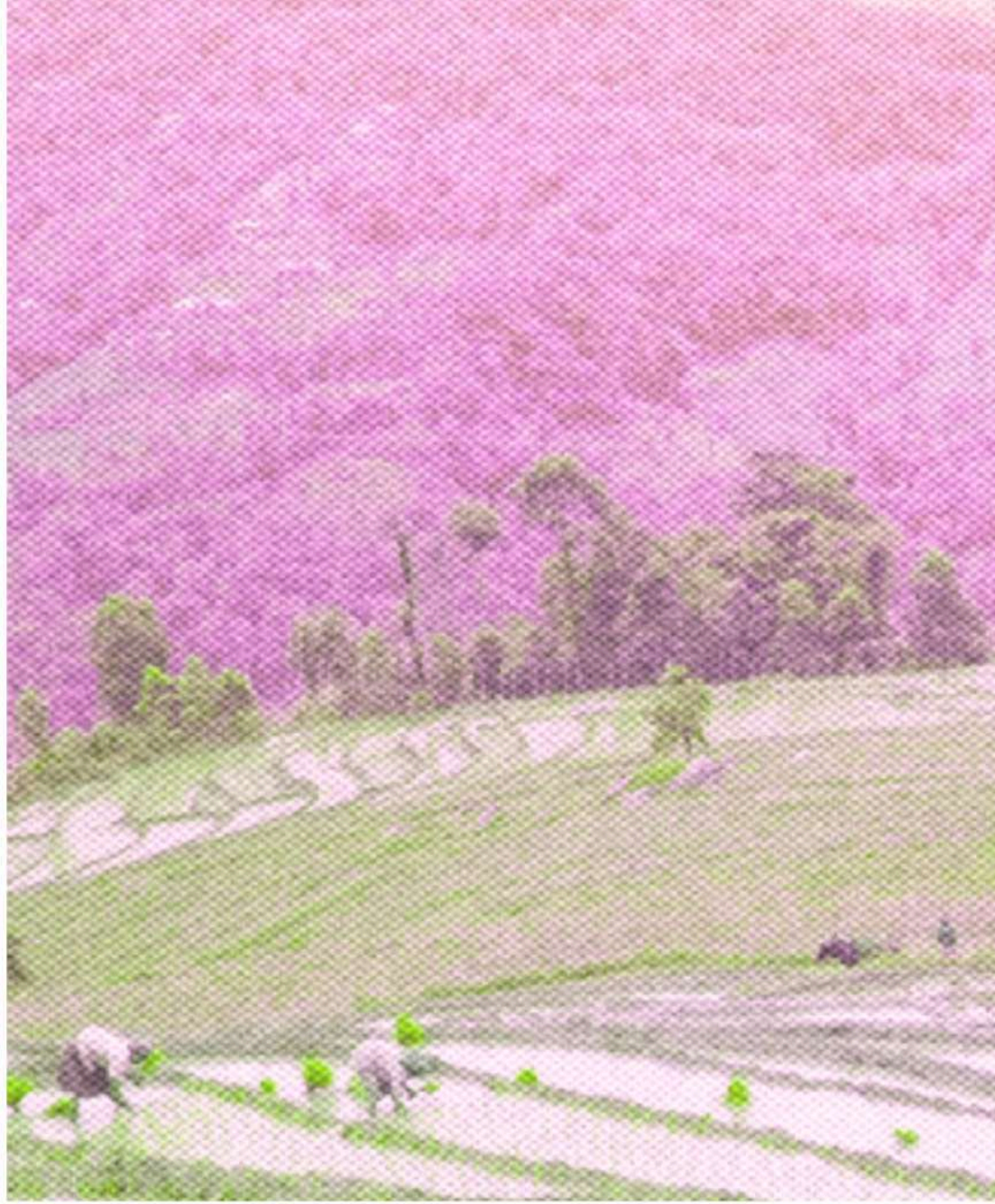
01

Rum-Tech Feminist Agro-Mobility Infrastructure

Context

Rumtek, Sikkim - a hillside hinterland 23 kilometres from Gangtok

Gangtok - the capital city of Sikkim



Rum-Tech is a spatial and systemic intervention that reimagines agro-mobility in Sikkim as one of care, access and collective governance over efficiency and productivity. It challenges the extractive logic of Gangtok's centralised food systems by redistributing logistics, decision-making, and spatial resources through a women-led cooperative infrastructure.

Anchored in two underused government sites in Rumtek and a pilot node in Tadong, Rum-Tech creates a mobility commons where agricultural exchange, mobility, and care coalesce to support rural women excluded by legal, infrastructural, and economic systems.

This intervention is shaped by the feminist design principle that mobility must serve caregiving, interdependence, and daily negotiation.



Friday, Sep 23, 2022 12:15 [IST]



Last Update: Friday, Sep 23, 2022 06:44 [IST]

GMC CONDUCTS DECONGESTION DRIVE AT LAL BAZAAR, REMOVES UNAUTHORIZED OCCUPANTS

KUNAL RAI

GANGTOK, : Gangtok Municipal Corporation today removed unauthorised occupants from Kanchenjunga Shopping Complex at Lal Bazaar here. The removal is part of decongestion drive initiated by the GMC to de-clutter Lal Bazaar. The decongestion drive was carried out by Gangtok mayor Nell Bahadur Chettri, deputy mayor Tshering Palden Bhutia, and officials from Urban Development department and GMC.

Those non-allotted were given occupancy under 'N- series'. The N- series are operating their business and are continuing; we have not removed them. Those occupying the public space, staircase premises including the drinking water facility corners and lift front spaces are being scanned. Action is being taken considering the inconvenience to the customers. We will initiate further action wherein we will take help of the state police and remove such unauthorized shops as well. **Sikkimese people operating their business in unauthorized manner must cooperate. We plan to allocate the space to the left out first, once it is completed, we will definitely work towards facilitating legal space to the Sikkim Subject and COI holders and those operating business since years will be also taken care on priority.**

fig 27: news headline on decongestion drive in Lal Bazaar

Gangtok's food system depends on centralised distribution, with Lal Bazaar acting as the primary market node. Rural producers, many of them women, must arrive early, navigating unreliable transport and unpaid domestic responsibilities. Despite sustaining Gangtok's food economy, these women remain excluded from its infrastructure.

Recent government reports (Sikkim State Report, 2024) acknowledge severe congestion and breakdowns in urban transport coordination, yet rarely address the rural-urban funneling of labour. A 2023 MANAGE study highlighted that women farmers face intersecting barriers, including lack of legal identity documents (SSC/COI), exclusion from vendor registration schemes, and limited access to storage, information, or transit.

Based on lived experience and informal conversations with women in my family and community, the burden of peri-urban mobility spans physical, emotional, financial, and temporal dimensions. Common frictions include erratic shared taxi schedules, absence of rest stops or cold storage, and care duties that clash with market logistics. These exclusions, surfaced through both storytelling and policy analysis, form the core challenge Rum-Tech responds to, by asking how mobility infrastructure might be redesigned as a cooperative, care-based system.

The first rural node reclaims a defunct government cafeteria near a pharmacy college in Rumtek. This site combines agro-processing, mobility infrastructure, and training rooms that can support public programming and seasonal use. Its proximity to an educational institution anchors it as both a depot and a civic node.

The second rural site, near the Nehru Botanical Garden and Rumtek Monastery, activates unused government land as a seasonal commons with a shaded collection point, flexible market stalls, and care space for informal producers. Both sites reject mono-functionality by embedding community participation and rotational governance into their operation.

The urban node, situated on an underused plot in Tadong near Holy Cross School, serves as a vendor redistribution point. Located within a ward-scale ecosystem of homes, schools, and small shops, this site reroutes produce according to availability, not speculative demand. Across all sites, infrastructure is kept minimal: shaded platforms, cold storage rooms, modular kiosks, and community signage facilitate economic and social flow without monumentalising form.

Coordination takes place through shared taxi partnerships, rotational committees, and a kiosk-linked digital system. The network collectively logs information such as produce availability, shortages, and delivery coordination. This decentralised structure treats logistics as a cooperative commons.



fig 28: the commons and storage rural ward

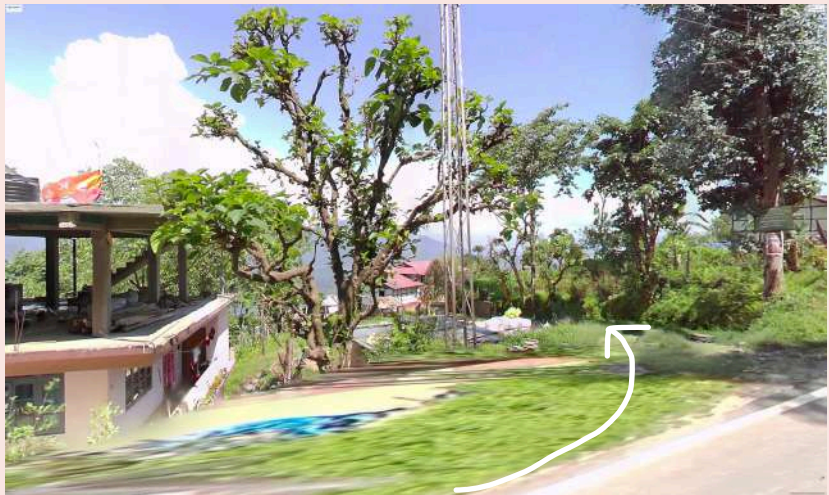


fig 29: the commons and storage rural ward



fig 30: the cold storage rural ward

Rumtek Site Plans

Spatial contexts of agro-commons infrastructure



Rumtek Site 1: Commons & Market Node

Shared infrastructure node for learning & cold storage



Rumtek Site 2: Storage & Learning Node

Underused government land

Spatial Intervention for the rural ward in Rumtek - Commons and storage node



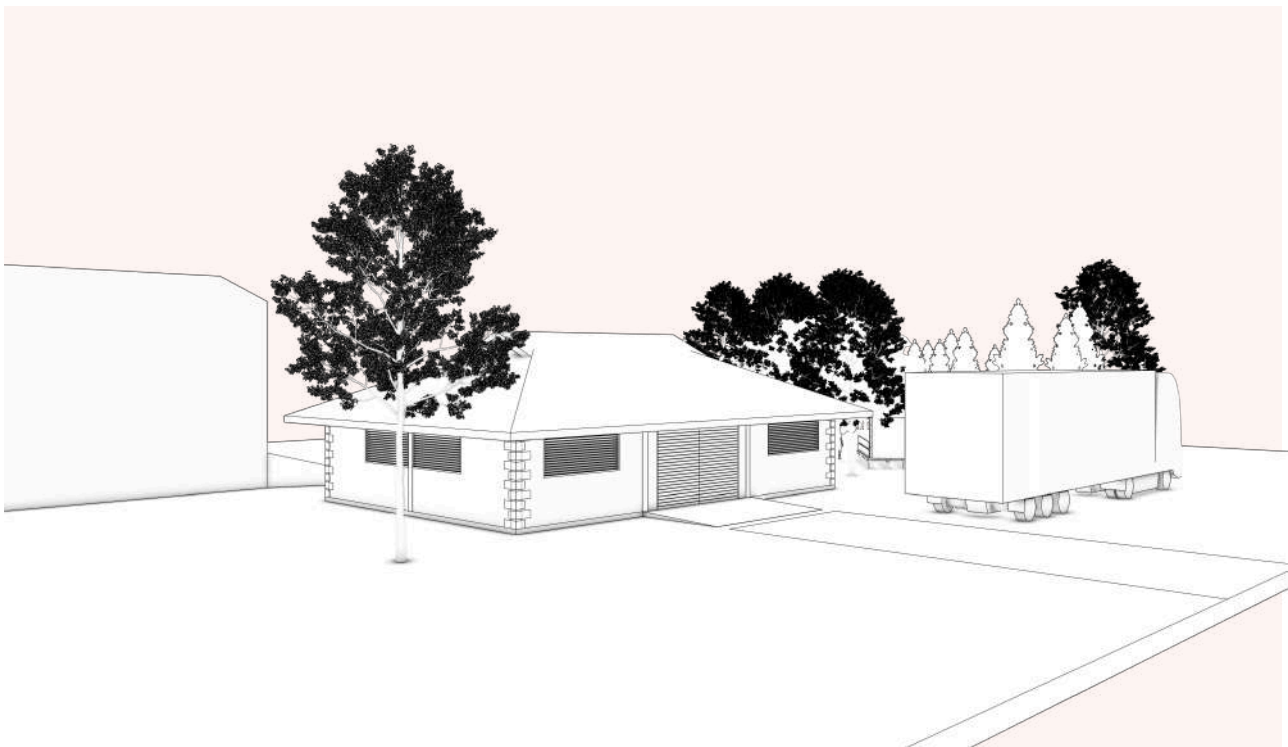
The node invites local exchange and care-based gathering under shaded zones. The structure blends open stalls, storytelling edges, and resting spots.



Reimagined as a dignified rural infrastructure, the node offers cold storage and bulk handling spaces, operated and maintained by local women cooperatives.



The node invites local exchange and care-based gathering under shaded zones. The structure blends open stalls, storytelling edges, and resting spots.



The back of the building functions as a drop-off and collection point

Governance and Feminist Positioning:

Rum-Tech's governance is rooted in feminist, relational values and structured through a rotating cooperative model. Inspired by precedents such as SEWA's RUDI system (Gujarat), the Matrix Feminist Design Co-operative (UK), and traditional trade networks among Bhutia-Lepcha communities, it emphasises labour, mutual accountability, and care over formal credentialing. Participants without SSC/COI are not excluded; participation is based on contribution—packing, coordinating, mentoring—rather than state-recognised identity.

This offers an embedded critique of how Sikkim's legal and infrastructural systems reinforce exclusion. Rum-Tech treats infrastructure as a political and social commons.

Its digital component, accessible via site-based kiosks, supports coordination and information-sharing while resisting extractive surveillance. It records logistics without prioritising visibility or growth. The governance system prioritises embedded trust and iterative feedback, not automation or optimisation.

This model is vulnerable, slow, and deeply collaborative. Its strength lies in visibility, relational accountability, and resistance to elite capture. It proposes that legitimacy comes not from documentation, but from shared labour and care.

Implications and Critical Appraisal:

Rum-Tech challenges Gangtok's centralised agro-logistics by proposing a decentralised system grounded in cooperation and care. It improves accessibility for informal sellers, alleviates pressure on central market nodes, and proposes infrastructure that recognises and supports rural women's mobility.

Its limitations are real. Digital access remains uneven. Taxi union negotiations risk gendered gatekeeping. Urban resistance to informal redistribution may reduce institutional support. And cooperatives always carry the risk of fatigue and co-option. Rum-Tech anticipates these through rotational leadership, minimal bureaucracy, and community ownership.

The model resists the expectation of scalability. It asks what mobility might look like if shaped by shared use, recognition, and negotiation—not speed. It rejects the neutrality of infrastructure, instead grounding its logic in everyday mobilities between home and market, farm and road. These paths, carried out by women who move, wait, and coordinate care, become the basis for rethinking logistics as a feminist, collective infrastructure of belonging.

Role Within the Thesis:

As one of three interconnected design scenarios, Rum-Tech anchors this thesis's argument that mobility systems in Sikkim must emerge from within local knowledge, embodied labour, and collaborative governance. It serves as a spatial and narrative device for exploring feminist urbanism in practice, foregrounding interdependence, slow systems, and situated infrastructure as legitimate tools of design justice.



02

Car(e) Nodes Care-Based Urban Infrastructure

Context :

Different neighborhood
wards in *Gangtok, Sikkim*
with pilot interventions
in two sites-

Tadong
Daragaon



fig 31: alleys in Daragaon

Car(e) Node is a feminist design brief. It is not a singular architectural object but a network of care infrastructures embedded in Gangtok's urban fabric.

It was born from observations of daily fatigue, invisible labour, and fractured support networks in the city. The parenthetical "(e)" in Car(e) challenges dominant, vehicle-centric urban logics and reclaims space for care, presence, and pause.

Despite rapid urbanisation, Gangtok's planning frameworks overlook everyday caregiving. Women and children are barely mentioned in the city's Healthy Streets Policy (2019), and only in relation to safety. Larger urban schemes like AMRUT and the Smart City Plan prioritise aesthetics and flow for visitors, while neglecting pedestrian access, rest areas, or decentralised health and caregiving infrastructures.

These omissions render care invisible both spatially and politically.

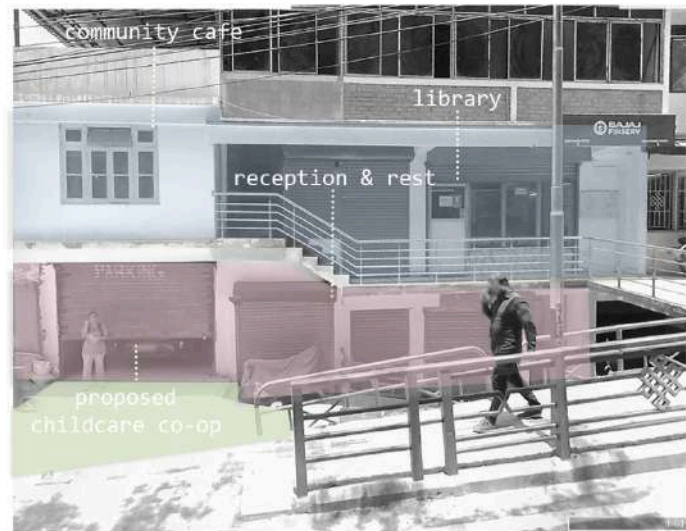
Framed within this thesis's central claim that feminist urbanism is a spatial method for making exclusion visible and imagining otherwise, Car(e) Nodes act as speculative tools to reconfigure how support, infrastructure, and public presence are shared. Influenced by Donna Haraway's notion of situated knowledge and the principles of feminist design justice, this intervention centres care as spatial labour and proposes that design need not monumentalise to transform.



site plan of the IGNOU site



site context with proposed interventions



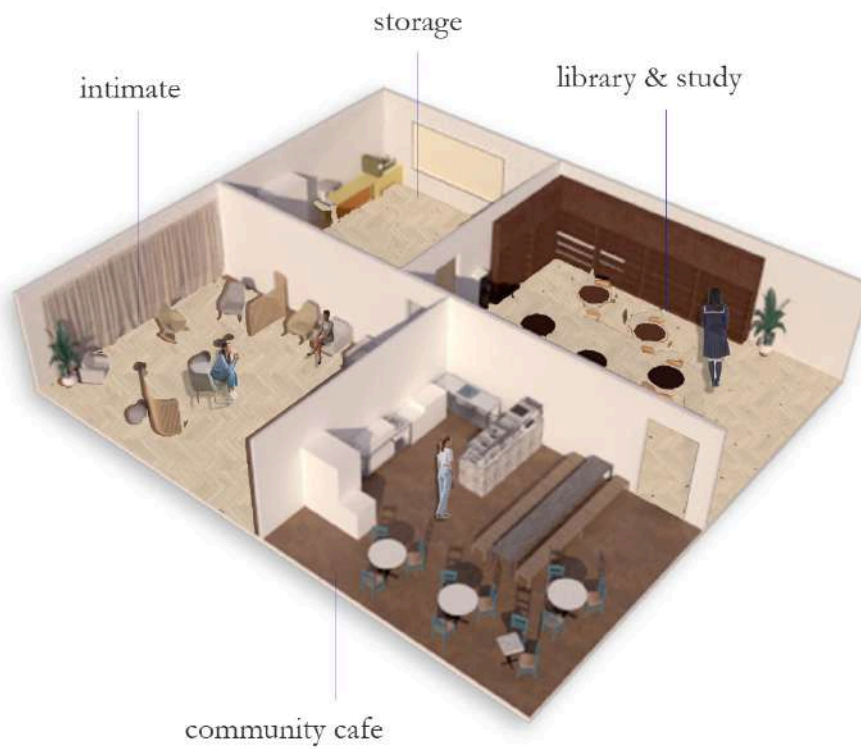
elevational zoning of the spaces

- rest/knowledge
- care
- commons

Ground floor



First floor





Car(e) Node

Daragaon's Care Gaps: *Margins in Motion*

layered with utilities, this vital link remains precarious for daily use, especially for elders and caregivers



care and kinship unfold in back alleys where infrastructure fails to meet movement

steps through risk, routine, and responsi-



upward journey embedded with invisible work ; walking as care labor

Urban Conditions and Site Selection:

Participatory foresight and role-based scenario responses revealed that women, especially low-income residents and migrants, often lack access to non-commercial public spaces. With healthcare centralised on steep terrain and movement structured around vehicles, those who care for children or elders are systemically excluded.

Car(e) Nodes respond to these frictions by proposing walkable, ward-scale micro-commons - spaces where caregiving, rest, and gathering are infrastructurally supported.

Site 1: IGNOU Building, Tadong : Retrofitting for Commons

The IGNOU site (Open university), a publicly recognised yet underutilised structure, is retrofitted into a Car(e) Node. Programmatic layers include:

Commons Zone (Exterior): Shaded rest platform, community mural, flexible signage, and a water point.

Support Zone (Interior): Drop-in childcare corner, elder seating, menstrual and first-aid supplies.

Exchange & Learning Zone: Rotating access to DIY repair, skill-sharing, storytelling circles, and a shared resource board.

Design is based on vernacular materials, participatory colour palettes, and modular partitions. Co-design ensures that spatial expression arises from community logic.

Site 2: Daragaon Edge Node : Threshold Activation

This speculative site imagines how a hillside path, frequently used by caregivers, can be adapted using minimal, high-impact interventions:

Built bench or shaded pause platform

Co-painted mural surface

Drinking water tap and community board

Solar lamp for evening safety

This site operates less as a facility and more as a threshold, transforming a non-space into a moment of rest, relation, and quiet dignity.

Governance and Process:

Car(e) Nodes are cooperatively held. Each node is managed by a rotating women's committee supported by youth, elders, and local caregivers. Services are low-barrier and inclusive, allowing undocumented residents and renters to participate equally.

Governance is fluid and iterative. Programmes are seasonally adapted through community meetings. Formal ward support is welcomed but not required. Here, informality is a design asset. It allows flexibility, responsiveness, and embedded accountability.

Appraisal and Reflection:

Car(e) Nodes resist the logic of urban monumentalism. Their strength lies in making care visible as infrastructural work. They offer a feminist reinterpretation of planning, wherein support systems are neither add-ons nor backgrounded, but central to how neighbourhoods function.

Risks persist. Care nodes can unintentionally overburden those already stretched by unpaid labour. Over-formalisation might threaten their informality. However, if grounded in shared accountability and reciprocal value, Car(e) Nodes can serve as durable micro-commons that anchor daily life.

Drawing from Federici's framing of reproductive labour and Haraway's situated feminist praxis, this intervention proposes that feminist commons are not utopian ideals but active design propositions. They reframe care as a public right and space as a site of shared, maintained, and relational infrastructure.

Role Within the Thesis

Car(e) Node advances this thesis's central claim that feminist spatial practice offers both critique and alternative propositions. Alongside **Rum-Tech and Re:Memory Commons**, this intervention highlights that urban justice in Gangtok cannot be achieved through scale or spectacle alone but through proximity, iterative design, and community-held processes of infrastructural care.



03

Re:Memory Commons in NIT

Context:

Namgyal Institute of Tibetology, Gangtok, Sikkim: A Tibetan heritage museum founded in 1958



fig 32: Traditional architecture openings in NIT

Re:Memory Commons is a conceptual spatial brief that reimagines the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology (NIT) through a feminist rethinking of authorship, institutional memory, and access. It builds directly on this thesis's central claim that feminist urbanism is not only a critique of dominant infrastructures but also a spatial method for making exclusion visible and imagining otherwise.

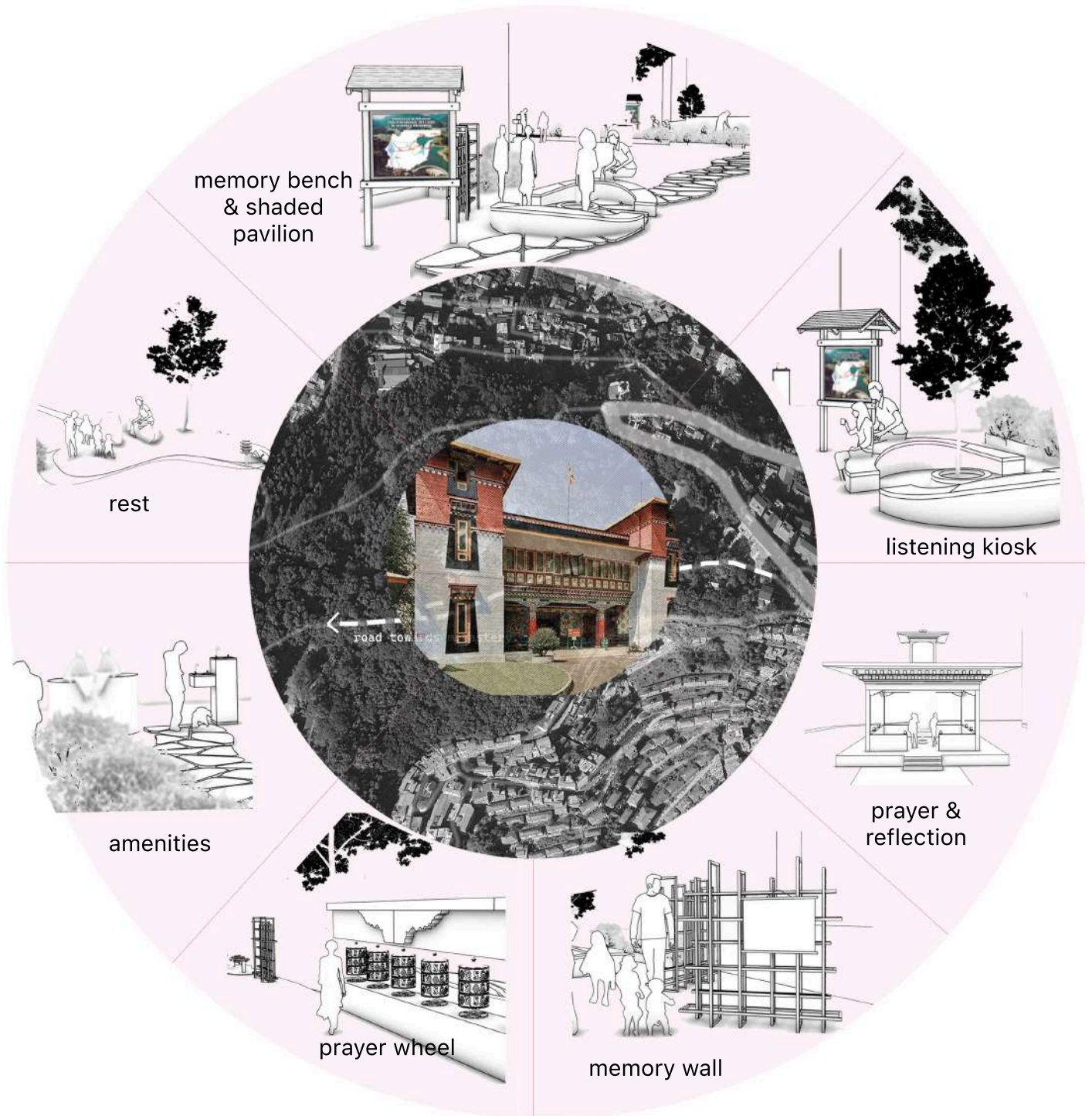
This intervention, like the others in the thesis, explores how design can become a performative and situated practice that unsettles existing systems. Here, by intervening in the symbolic and spatial governance of cultural memory. (NIT) not through physical redesign but through a feminist rethinking of access, authorship, and cultural stewardship. This intervention asks how memory institutions in Sikkim might become porous, participatory spaces, especially for women, youth, and Bhutia and Lepcha communities historically excluded from formal heritage discourse.

While the Institute has recently announced digitisation initiatives, health partnerships, and educational outreach in 2025, these remain tied to formal academic production.

Re:Memory Commons aims to question the value of presence, storytelling, and intergenerational care in comparison to documentation.

Distributed Commons of Care & Memory – NIT Grounds

A radial diagram of spatial gestures activating care, access, and everyday belonging around the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology.



Re: Memory Commons : Threshold Interventions



Micro-interventions, such as collaborative memory walls, resting areas, and sensory planting, make space for pause, gathering, and gentle resistance within an otherwise formal institutional terrain.



The site invites public intimacy through playful spatial cues, modular seating, knowledge exchange kiosks, and shaded storytelling spaces, foregrounding informal histories and lived presence. The intervention resists architectural hierarchy by making memory, rest, and reflection.

Feminist Futures & Spatial Praxis

Five guiding principles shape the Re:Memory Commons brief:

Access as Presence: Encouraging participation without requiring formal validation or academic credentials.

Thresholds as Invitations: Redesigning imposing architectural features to welcome lingering, pausing, and informal gathering.

Memory as Commons: Valuing oral histories, drawings, zines, and voice notes as legitimate cultural records.

Care as Programming: Designing for emotional time, in terms of grief, joy, reflection, rather than consumption or spectacle.

Institutional Space as Contested Terrain:

Recognising that institutional reform is negotiated. This project works alongside NIT's evolution without demanding erasure or replacement.

Author's note:

I grew up in Gangtok but never once visited the NIT. It wasn't until my grandfather urged me to go, reminding me not to forget our past, that I finally entered the site. That brief visit made me realise of something that later became central to this thesis. It was how institutional memory in Sikkim can feel distant even to those it claims to represent. Re:Memory Commons emerges, partly from this distance. It is not a critique of the Institute's archival work but a proposition for what else the space might hold, when heritage is reframed not as a static collection but as a living, co-authored commons.

Policy Gaps and Feminist Possibilities:

This thesis surfaces critical policy gaps that shape spatial exclusion in Sikkim.

These include: inheritance laws that deny women land rights when married to non-COI holders; zoning frameworks that overlook informal care infrastructures and pedestrian access; and mobility schemes under AMRUT and Smart City initiatives that prioritise visual order and tourism over pedestrian mobility, everyday caregiving routines, and neighbourhood-scale accessibility.

From a feminist urban lens, these gaps reflect deeper epistemic silences in governance. Through narrative, policy critique, and speculative foresight, this thesis proposes a feminist policy praxis grounded in proximity, mutual care, and community authorship.

Each design intervention doubles as a spatial critique and a counter-policy brief. **Rum-Tech** proposes cooperative governance as care infrastructure. **Car(e) Nodes** legitimise informal, low-barrier urban support systems. **Re:Memory Commons** reframes heritage as shared authorship rather than elite custodianship. These interventions do not intend to replace formal policy, they invite a re-anchoring of governance in lived realities, emotional labour, and distributed spatial knowledge.

Spatial practice here is a method of refiguring what policy could become when shaped by those on the margins.

Pathways for Realisation:

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This thesis lays the foundation for a spatial practice shaped by feminist urbanism and rooted in Sikkimese realities. I intend to prototype these ideas through scenario exhibitions, temporary installations, and speculative archives, whether hosted in Gangtok, online, or through translocal feminist collectives. As part of this, I have contributed an article on Sikkim's mobility challenges to MobiliseYourCity, aiming to open up dialogue between local planning practices and feminist critique. I am also initiating conversations with planners in Gangtok to explore how grounded, care-based infrastructure might inform future urban interventions.

I hope to work alongside civic platforms like Manch Sikkim, youth groups, and caregiving networks to explore how the Car(e) Nodes or Rum-Tech might evolve as community-held models. Beyond spatial design, I aim to develop public-facing materials, like co-designing toolkits, mobile zines, and open-source briefs to foster participatory authorship and local pedagogy. An online platform could serve as a living archive, allowing wider engagement and adaptation.

Eventually, I hope this work evolves into a spatial practice, whether as a civic studio, research-activist collective, or pedagogical platform, grounded in decolonial feminist values and the everyday. The ambition is a long-term commitment to design as a form of quiet resistance, shared authorship, and collective reimagination.

to imagine
futures
otherwise,
we begin at
the edge

List of Figures

fig 1: Corridor in Rumtek Monastery, illustrating a layered threshold and everyday spatial care.

Source: Author's photo.

fig 2: Monastery in mist, symbolising remoteness, reverence, and the layered spatialities that shape Sikkim's urban-rural imaginaries.

Source: Unknown (used under fair use for academic purposes).

fig 3: Aerial view of Gangtok's M.G. Marg with cable car infrastructure and central market road.

Source: Online image, attribution unknown — used under fair use for educational purposes.

fig 4: Roadside settlement in North Sikkim, showing dispersed habitation and the dramatic terrain shaping daily mobility. Source: author

fig 5: Annotated satellite view of Gangtok showing its elevation, area, and population.

Source: Google Maps (accessed 2025).

fig 6: Screenshot of the Sikkim Succession Act, highlighting exclusionary clauses tied to Certificate of Identification (COI) and gender.

Source: Indian legal database (accessed 2025).

fig 7: Excerpt from the Sikkim Subject Rules illustrating how identity and rights are gendered through marriage.

Source: Indian legal database (accessed 2025).

fig 8: Excerpt from a public opinion piece by Karma Lobzang Bhutia highlighting the gendered exclusions in Sikkimese citizenship.

Source: Online editorial article (2023).

fig 9: Screenshot from Manch Sikkim's public discussion on "The Sikkimese Mindset" (2025), held on Google Meet.

Source: Manch Sikkim (online event capture).

fig 10: Screenshot shown during the same event, illustrating precarious pedestrian infrastructure in rural Sikkim.

Source: Manch Sikkim (presentation slide capture).

fig 11 : screenshot of a Facebook post highlighting the luxurious and vastness of the new West Point Mall Source: Facebook

fig 12 : screenshot of a toursim page explaining the aesthetic and tourist value of the same property

Source: Facebook

fig 13: Instagram posts discussing public concerns and legal discourse around the West Point Mall development in Gangtok.

Source: Screengrabs from @sikkimcord and @thesikkimchronicle (Instagram).

fig 14: Social media post by The Sikkim Chronicle on the NGT's dismissal of the petition against West Point Mall.

Source: Screenshot from @thesikkimchronicle on Instagram.

- fig 15: Photograph of the neighborhood of Daragaon. (Source: Manch, 2024 Campaign)
- fig 16: Photograph of the neighborhood of Daragaon (Source: Manch, 2024 Campaign)
- fig 17: Photograph of the neighborhood of Daragaon (Source: Manch, 2024 Campaign)
- fig 18: Photograph of a thangka.. Source: Pinterest
- fig 19: Photograph of the neighborhood of Daragaon (Source: Manch, 2024 Campaign)
- fig 20: Informal parking in MG Marg controlled by male youth. (Source: Facebook)
- fig 21: Screenshot Reddit discourse including author. Source: Reddit
- fig 22: Screenshot of an article on "woman Empowerment" by Sikkim Tourism, edited and redacted by author. Source: Sikkim Tourism website
- fig 23: Scales of Analysis. Source: Author
- fig 24: Daragaon neighborhood (Source: Manch, 2024 Campaign)
- fig 25: landscape in North Sikkim. Source: Author
- fig 26: agriculture farming in Rumtek. Source: Google
- fig 27: news headline on decongestion drive in Lal Bazaar. Soucre: Sikkim Chronicles website
- fig 28: the commons and storage rural ward(Source: Google Earth)
- fig 29: the commons and storage rural ward(Source: Google Earth)
- fig 30: the cold storage rural ward(Source: Google Earth)
- fig 31: alleyways in Daragaon. (Source: Manch, 2024 Campaign)
- fig 32: Traditional architecture openings in NIT (Soucre: Google)

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