

# **Yangon's Heritage: Steps Towards Preservation**

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When I returned to live in Yangon in 2007, my sense of direction was rooted in my upbringing of the 1950s and 1960s, the bittersweet memories and epic history of those times. I knew everything and nothing – Scott Market, the English Methodist School, St. John's, St. Mary's Cathedral, Golden Valley, Kyaikkasan Race Course, the Union Club, Kokine Club, Park Street and the Royal Lakes, and the Rangoon Sailing Club on Victoria Lake. I was familiar with York Road, Halpin, Fraser, Prome Road, Merchant Street and a host of other Anglicized place names, but I was utterly lost in modern Yangon, until I transcribed the Strand Hotel's antique map of downtown "Rangoon" onto a contemporary map. Finally, I had come home. More correctly, I could find homes and places I'd known, history hiding in plain sight, my favorite being the beautifully refurbished Zoological Gardens, founded in 1924.

Myanmar carries the burden and blessing of one of the most romantic histories in the world, shaped by Theravada teachings, Jataka tales and Nat legends, swashbuckling Portuguese sailors and the star-crossed warrior-poet Nat Shin Aung, valiant efforts by monks, writers and students to achieve independence, the death of the Martyrs, the decades of silent national grief, the amazing new beginnings, and the age-old Buddhist principle of freedom from fear. As in most tropical cultures, there are thousands of ancient religious shrines built for the ages, but there are no ancient palaces or public halls, attributable possibly to the Buddhist view of impermanence and the devastations of World War II by three invading forces.

## **An emerging interest in heritage preservation**

Among the dozens of recent changes evident around Myanmar and particularly in Yangon, there is a new interest in preservation of the erstwhile colonial structures which have endured, as well as an eagerness to share these cultural treasures that would otherwise be frozen in time, forgotten by accident or design.

Although dozens of architectural fans and history buffs have dreamed for years



Figure 1. Yangon rooftops: Yangon River, the port, City Hall and Mahabandoola Square (Aye Min, 2012; Trish Gallery, Yangon)

of a renaissance for Yangon's colonial buildings, there has been until recently very little hope or funding for such a massive undertaking, although a list of 189 potential candidate properties was established by the Yangon City Development Corporation in 1996–2000 as a first step. In 2008, Hurricane Nargis tore up trees and opened up overgrown gardens and parks, revealing hundreds of beautiful old buildings, many in disrepair, all evocative of the country's history. When government operations were removed to the new capital at Naypyidaw, the huge inventory of beautiful colonial architecture was virtually abandoned, presenting a once-in-a-century opportunity for a whole range of "what-if?" changes, notwithstanding the general aversion to memorializing the unfortunate events of colonialism. What if these structures could be preserved to benefit this and future generations of Myanmar people, to retain historical accuracy, to embellish the urban landscape, and to help the economy?

This issue was debated in many places and eventually these discussions bore fruit. Dr. Thant Myint-U, distinguished author, scholar and grandson of U Thant, who was the secretary-general of the United Nations, notes,

The Yangon Heritage Trust was founded in early 2012 by a group of Myanmar historians, architects, businessmen, and others, with the aim of seeking to protect, promote and preserve Yangon's unique architectural heritage. The Trust is a Myanmar non-governmental organization. It held its first international conference on 1 June in Yangon and is currently working with the Myanmar government and a wide range of national and international partners towards

a comprehensive conservation strategy for the city, as part of a wider urban development plan. The Trust hopes its efforts will not only protect the city's architectural heritage for future generations and help create a more liveable city, but also celebrate Yangon's rich and cosmopolitan past.

Thant Myint-U became the first head of the Yangon Heritage Trust and chaired the first conference which included a stellar speaker-roster of public and private sector experts, government leaders and international resources. The outcome of the conference was a commitment from city and national government leaders, private-sector business and academics, leading engineers and architects – all determined to initiate a formal planning process for the preservation and enhancement of the 189 buildings identified as significant architectural and historical resources.

Phillip Davies, the former director of English Heritage, London, said:

Yangon is the hidden pearl of Asia – and one of the world's great colonial trading cities. Its superb heritage of historic buildings is a huge cultural and economic asset that could so easily be lost through ill-considered development. It desperately needs a sensitive vision for the future based on its unique qualities to ensure that it does not repeat the mistakes of other cities in the region with inappropriate high-rise buildings in the wrong places, and unrestricted traffic growth.



Figure 2. Yangon Railway Station, ca. 1932, after the Mandalay style (Aye Min, 2010; Trish Gallery, Yangon)

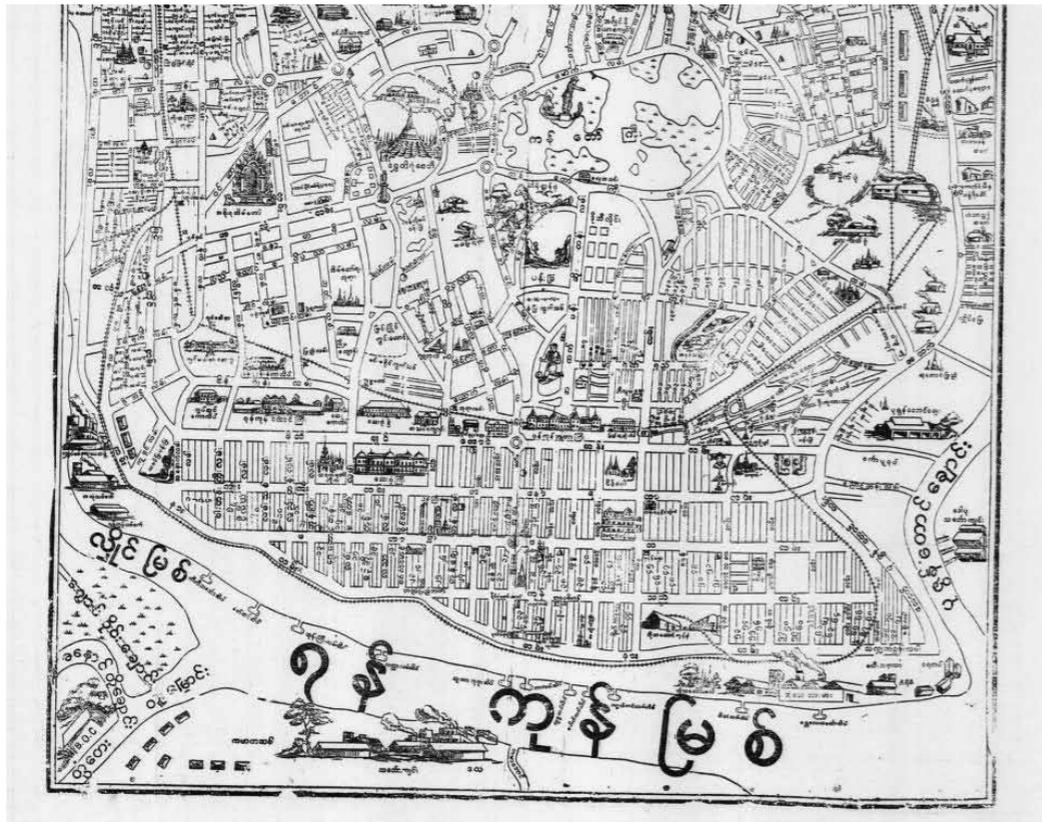


Figure 3. Yangon City Map, ca. 1950s, showing Anglicized and Myanmar names (courtesy of Ma Thanegi, Things Myanmar, 2012)

Thant Myint-U echoed this theme in his closing remarks at the conference: “The Yangon Heritage Trust intends to offer that vision to the government and people of Myanmar in the next couple of months.”

Work has already begun on a number of these important buildings, and the plan for restoration, financing and marketing is being refined for presentation to government in the last quarter of 2012. Probably one of the most dynamic features of the plan is an impact analysis of the various locations, primarily in Dagon, Bahan and Botataung Townships, and mostly within the lower quadrant of the city between Bogyoke Aung San Street as the northern limit and Strand Road to the south, bordered by Pansodan and Sule Pagoda Road to the west and Bo Aung Kyaw Street to the east. One of the critical elements of the planning process is inclusion of the long-term tenants who have made their homes in these historic locations, know the history and have lived and worked in the area for many years.

Everyone has their own favorite historic property or story, such as the thunder of horses' hooves at Kyaikkasan's four sand, gravel and turf tracks – one and a half miles of the best track in Asia – that still exists as Myanmar prepares for equestrian events at the SEA Games in 2013. There are also individual private endeavors to restore and maintain properties in other locations – Candacraig in Pyin Oo Lwin, the

Sao Mya Thee homes in Kalaw (where I lived in the 1950s), and literally dozens of efforts conducted by owners anxious to participate in the renaissance. Many of these refurbished homes and buildings bring high rental prices as diplomatic residences, restaurants, art galleries, hotels and guest houses. The economic benefits of the renaissance are only beginning.

The Yangon Heritage Trust is setting up offices and staff in Yangon, developing a strong Internet presence ([yangonheritagetrust.org](http://yangonheritagetrust.org)), as well as a schedule of workshops and conferences to sustain the momentum.

### Yangon and its historic buildings

Yangon means “end of strife”. King Alaungpaya gave this name to a small fishing town, formerly called Dagon, in the mid eighteenth century. The change of name came at the end of years of war with the Mon kingdom of southern Myanmar. The Sule Pagoda then was on a high spur of laterite, surrounded to the south by swampland inhabited by birds, elephants, crocodiles and tigers. In 1783, the British East India Company obtained permission from the Myanmar king to open a trading post on this swampland, calling it by the anglicized name of “Rang-oon”.

In 1852, the Second Anglo Burma war resulted in the British annexation of the fertile Bago provinces. The governor general, Lord Dalhousie, delegated Dr. William Montgomerie (who had some experience in the urban planning of Singapore) and Lt. Alexander Fraser of the Bengal Engineers to draw up plans for a new “Rangoon”, complete with wide boulevards, streets, sewers and water systems. The first buildings were better than the previous barn or prison-like residences used for immigrant labor in the delta. During the 1870s, work started on construction of the government, commercial and institutional buildings we still see today. City planning and governance were colorful and erratic, with huffy quotations at the time about wholesale degradation, corruption and filth. The plans drawn up by the Royal Engineer Corps show a whole series of sluice sewers to be built in the marshy area below Sule Pagoda. Unfortunately these were not completed, which may well be the cause of the annual flooding that still occurs today.

By the end of the eighteenth century, however, Yangon was a flourishing port that Michael Symes, the British envoy to the Konbaung Court at Ava, thought “the best in the Eastern World”. The wide streets, spacious designs, elegant proportions, and the unique colonial architecture of red brick and yellow trim was reminiscent of Calcutta, Singapore, and other colonial cities of the era from Hanoi to Batavia.

Here I will focus on a number of the most beloved buildings, including some like the Strand Hotel where renovation has been completed, and others like the Secretariat, and Yangon General Hospital, where work is urgently needed. The following partial inventory has been compiled by noted author Ma Thanegi, with



Figure 4. Yangon General Hospital on Bogyoke Aung San Road, ca. 1904-11, built in the Georgian style (Aye Min, 2010; Trish Gallery, Yangon)

selected artwork by artist U Aye Min provided by Patricia Pun of Trish Gallery.<sup>1</sup> They are collaborating on a volume about the history and preservation of Myanmar architecture that will serve as a benchmark for the work ahead.

### *The buildings<sup>2</sup>*

The expansion of the colonial heart of Yangon made Sule Pagoda the center, and it remains so to this day. Some architecture of that period survives along the streets in the neighborhood of the Strand Hotel, probably the best-maintained remnant of colonial architecture in the whole country. Once owned by Messrs. Sarkies Brothers, owners of the Raffles Hotel in Singapore, the Strand opened in 1901 with 60 rooms. A French chef ruled the kitchen, with eight-course menus offered daily. A room cost Rs. 10 a night, a hefty sum in those times. The Strand is the only colonial hotel left intact after the bombs of World War II.

Across the road from the Strand is the Australian Embassy, once part of the hotel premises. The British Embassy was built down the street in 1920 and was once owned by J & F Graham Co., which exported rice and imported Western made goods.

Architectural styles wrought many variations on the standard of four-storied

<sup>1</sup> Aye Min's work is on display at Trish Gallery, Excellent Condominium, Patra/Min Kyaung Streets, Dagon, Yangon.

<sup>2</sup> For an account of these buildings and a walking tour, see Sarah Rooney, *30 Heritage Buildings of Yangon: Inside the City that Captured Time* (Chicago: Serindia, 2012).

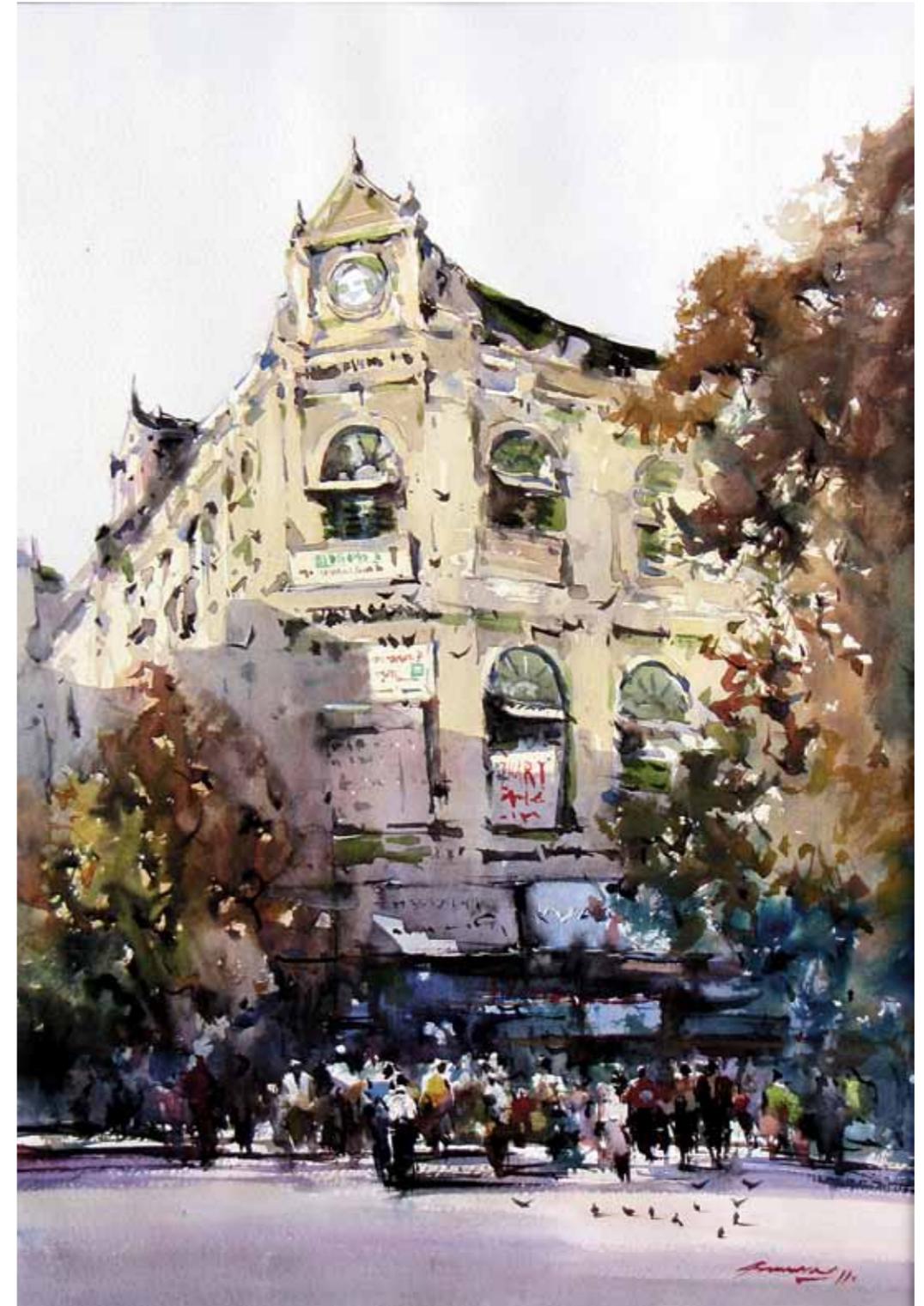


Figure 5. Victorian elegance: overlooking Pansodan Street, formerly Phayre Street. (Aye Min, 2010; Trish Gallery, Yangon)



Figure 6. Bankers' Row: Imposing colonnades and porticos of the early twentieth century on the former Lloyds Bank building (Aye Min, 2010; Trish Gallery, Yangon)

commercial or residential buildings with 14-foot ceilings, wide verandahs and recessed windows. The red-brick Customs House was built in 1916 in place of an old wooden shed. A long limestone building erected in 1931 now houses the Township Judicial Offices, and was formerly the Burma Socialist Program Party Headquarters. The magnificent building has an imposing façade of lofty pillars and thick walls of solid stone.

Not far away is the Myawaddy Bank with cream-yellow Ionic columns behind the fluffy leaves of tamarind trees. Across the road is the former Imperial Bank of India, a jewel of an edifice built in 1914.

Down Pansodan (street of the fabric dyes), once known as Phayre Street, one can see the imposing Port Authority building with its high tower on the corner. Across the street is a smaller building, now the Civil Courts, but once the Accountant General's Office, built before 1900. Nearby is an office of the Information Ministry, built after the First World War. It has a charming, slender design, wedged in between the massive Port Authority and what was once Grindlays Bank, which served briefly as the National Museum. It is an imposing four-storied building with spare lines; its unadorned half-pillars are spanned with walls of lacy masonry.

An elegant building with tall Corinthian pillars rising nearly three stories high was once headquarters of the Irrawaddy Flotilla Company, built in 1933 for a shipping company that started operations in 1862. During World War II, the company voluntarily scuttled all its ships so that they would not fall into the hands of the Japanese army. From time to time, even in recent years, some have been dredged

out of the muddy bottom of the Ayerawaddy River. After independence, the building became the headquarters of the Inland Water Transport Board, which still operates many historic vessels.

Along Pansodan, more so than other streets, there are still many more surviving examples of colonial architecture, including stately office buildings as well as a pretty little structure tucked away in between. At the corner where Pansodan meets Merchant Street, Rander House sits opposite Sofaer's Buildings, opened on 1 January 1906, and now the home of the Lokanat Art Gallery.

At the next corner with Mahabandoola Street, the Department of Communications building, erected in 1914, faces towards the Tejoomal Building shown in 1890 photographs, and a beautiful but empty clock face stares down at the busy intersection.

Running parallel to Strand Road is Merchant Street. The pretty Indian Embassy building was built in 1914 and was once owned by the Oriental Life Insurance Company. Across from it, there is an elegant three storied building built in 1930 and once owned by S. Oppenheimer and Company that handled a diverse range of goods from police uniforms to orchids, elephant tack and Underwood typewriters.

Between Maha Bandoola and Bo Aung Kyaw Streets lies the Secretariat, a massive red-brick Victorian era building begun in 1889 and completed in 1905, with four wings intercepted with three-storied blocks on the corners and centers of each. The compound fills an entire block with luxuriant but now overgrown gardens in

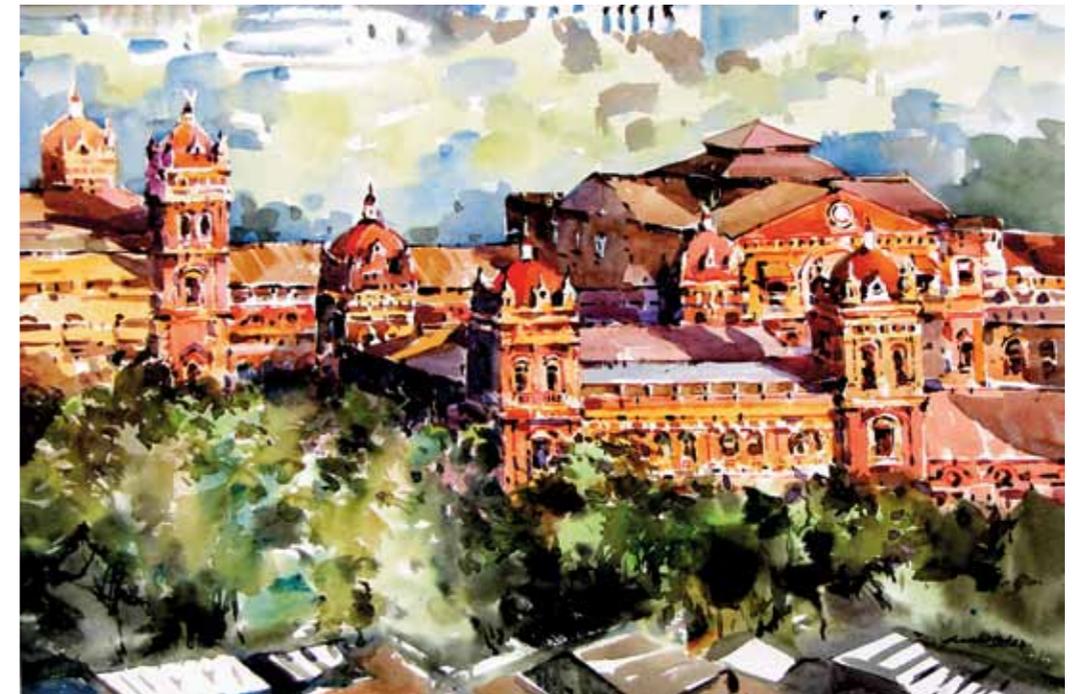


Figure 7. The Secretariat, ministerial buildings ca. 1889–1905 (Aye Min, 2010; Trish Gallery, Yangon)

each quadrant. A huge dome over the front entrance was destroyed by an earthquake in 1930, along with a number of the towers and pavilions. Cloaked in the red-bricked dignity befitting its role, it has served as the nerve center of the government through many political transitions, and is mute testimony to Myanmar's perseverance. It was the site of the great tragedy of modern Myanmar. On 19 July 1947, General Aung San, the forceful leader of the emerging nation, and five members of his Cabinet were assassinated while in a meeting, only a few months before Independence on 4 January 1948. The quiet hallways stand ready for yet another role in remembrance of times past, and there are plans to dedicate the space to meditation or a museum of the war era

The recently re-opened Bogyoke Aung San Museum lies off Natmawk Lane (formerly Park Street) near the German Embassy. Entering the well-kept grounds of the historic 1920s mansion, one feels a welcoming presence, as though the young Bogyoke and his family are happy to receive you in their airy, high-ceilinged home, surrounded by polished teakwood floors and dark teak trim and fretwork, delightfully carved. The home is inspiring, containing the family's simple, elegant furnishings, framed photographs, a thoughtful collection of books on history, social topics and military strategy, and peaceful views of the Shwe Dagon and Kandawgyi Lake. People flock here with their families, leaving a neat array of footwear at the door, as at every Myanmar home; they smile at each other, happy to be visiting this special place, often bringing their aged family members who may remember visits long ago. The attendants are amiable and happy to provide information on the grounds and the home's poignant history, as well as its famous residents, past and present.

Back in the city center, further down Maha Bandoola from the Secretariat, Rowe and Company's department store was built in 1910 in much the same style as the Secretariat, and became a prestigious place to shop until it was nationalized in 1964 by the Socialist government. The architecture of the three-storied City Hall, officially opened in 1936, incorporates many traditional Myanmar motifs, such as floral designs, mythical creatures and the dancing peacock, symbol of the Konbaung dynasty. The Hall was built on land that the Municipality Committee bought from the British Government for Rs. 169,182, with construction costs of Rs.180,000, and has been recently renovated.

On Sule Pagoda Road between Maha Bandoola Street and Merchant Street, the Myanmar Travels and Tours building is one of the most beautiful examples of colonial architecture. The Chief Court sits off Maha Bandoola Street, facing Maha Bandoola Park, once known as Fytche Square. Beside the park is the elegant golden stupa of Sule Pagoda that marks the center of Yangon, and is often known as the "younger brother" of the 2000-year-old Shwe Dagon Pagoda, clearly visible on Singatura Hill in the near distance.

## Faith, hope and the future

The proximity of religious shrines, temples and churches is a signature characteristic of Yangon. Almost adjacent to Sule Pagoda, there is a large mosque, a Baptist church and a Hindu temple to Kali. Back up by the Secretariat on Bo Aung Kyaw Street, opposite the old Myanmar Times Building, is St. Mary's Cathedral, built in 1909 for Rs. 410,000, and newly renovated to celebrate its hundredth anniversary. It is renowned for its leaded glass windows, one of them honoring Saint M. Theresa of Calcutta. Dozens of former mission school buildings dot the city, all recognizable by distinctive architecture, and all a testament to the good works and intentions of people of many faiths.

Nothing gives a better sense of the people of Myanmar, the diverse races, cultures and religions living side by side in peace. It is fitting that these buildings of antiquity stand within sight of each other, their mellowing facades representing the aspirations and hard work of the past, and good work ahead for the future.

While there is great excitement and anticipation of the design and reconstruction work ahead, there is debate on the urgency of moving quickly to "save" these historical structures. In some cases, there is a disagreement about what type of renovation is appropriate, and at what cost. In other cases, a particular structure may have negative historical connotations, such as the Pegu Club, which was famously (and apocryphally) remembered for a sign that allegedly stated "No dogs or Burmese on the premises". There are in fact some sites that are too far gone to salvage, and perhaps others that are squeezed in-between completely unsuitable modern neighbors. And in many quarters of the city, there is already a huge construction boom underway, consisting almost entirely of high-rise skyline structures that would not be in keeping with the Heritage Trust concept. There is general agreement that the scope of the renovations must be guided by careful planning, inclusivity of purpose and a steady funding stream.

There is no question that the current work is spurred by an historic sense of place, a wish to restore order and hopes for stimulating tourism. These structures will probably continue to serve as commercial venues, although updated to new uses as restaurants, galleries, art centers, museums and the like. Success will require training for artisans and tourism professionals, marketing funds to get the message out, much more infrastructure, and more investment in secondary and tertiary education.

Of course, the speed of transition is a question mark. Most Asian cities that have instituted heritage policies and certified selected sites have done so over a ten or twenty year timeline. In Yangon's case, there is an urgent need to agree an action plan. Once that is established, and stakeholders identified, it will be important to proceed with care and respect for all concerns, precisely because the undertaking is so massive. Some predict a Nargis-like tsunami of investment and change, but quieter voices counsel incremental steps. As the Bogyoke Aung San Museum and

the golden Shwe Dagon complex rising beyond it remind us, it is important above all else to remember the dignity and timelessness of Yangon, “the end of strife”.