

ASSOCIATION OF MYANMAR ARCHITECTS (ed.), *Thirty Heritage Buildings of Yangon. Inside the City that Captured Time*. Chicago: Serindia Publications, 2012. 166 pages, US\$ 50.00. ISBN 978-1-932476-66-2

Although the city of Yangon (or Rangoon, as it was spelt until the 1990s) was designed on a drawing board soon after the annexation of Lower Burma in 1852, it was built largely between the 1880s and 1939. Since then the city has virtually been frozen in time, with as few old buildings being renovated as new buildings were constructed, and thus a degree of decay now adds to the charm of its colonial design. However, the modernization process of the country that began after 1990 and gained momentum with the introduction of a more civic form of government is posing an increasing threat to the city's architectural heritage, as investors and owners favour demolition and new construction over conservation. This book is a first attempt to put on record a selection of the heritage buildings so as to remind us of how much architecture in Yangon is worthy of preservation.

The work is arranged in six chapters, taking the reader from the area around the former Secretariat to the commercial buildings on Merchant and Strand Roads and finally to a few buildings in less central quarters. All buildings are illustrated by photographs that show both complete views and noteworthy details. The accompanying text provides general information on the history of each monument – architects, previous owners, wartime and post-war stories. Where available, historic images and architectural plans and drawings are included as well. Maps, background information on aspects of Yangon's rich history and occasional references from literary sources complement the presentation. Finally, the editors carefully document the most recent restorations and conversions that have ensured the survival of certain buildings.

The book is edited by the Association of Myanmar Architects (under the dynamic leadership of Thant Myint-U). The editors are open about their agenda: by pointing out the potentials of buildings, they make a strong case for the restoration and comprehensive conservation of the city's architectural heritage. This extremely noble cause gains even greater credence from comparisons with other historic cities of Asia, which demonstrate how swiftly the struggle for preservation is lost to 'big money' and how difficult it can become to retrieve the historic environment of a place once the monuments have gone – Singapore offers a particularly telling example in this respect. At the moment, Yangon's built-up environment still contains many intact monuments from the colonial period that deserve proper study before the demolition men are allowed to present us with a *fait accompli*. It would be a pity if the book became the final repository of the architecture of one of Asia's (and perhaps the world's) most beautiful and architecturally most accomplished cities.

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