

**Difficult History: Saving Yangon from Colonial Nostalgia**

By

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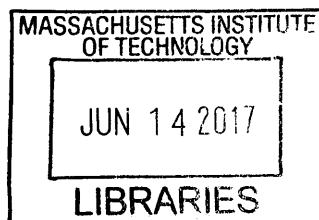
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## **Abstract**

Using the form of an essay I discuss the preservation of built heritage from the 'difficult' histories of colonialism and enslavement, linking together the global stories of oppression through colonialism and slavery to the global tourism and pressure for economic growth today. I focus on Yangon, Myanmar (Rangoon, Burma), which has the world's largest collection of Victorian and Edwardian colonial architecture. Years of active neglect by the military government have preserved these aging structures, but this era is coming to an end amid with often conflicting pressures to modernize and campaigns to actively restore the historic downtown. In this thesis I explore the politics of preservation and the market forces of international tourism that have led to nostalgic restorations of colonial relations for elite travelers.

Thesis Advisor: J. Phillip Thompson, Associate Professor

Reader: James Wescoat, Professor



## Difficult History:

Saving Yangon from Colonial Nostalgia

Aurora Kazi Bassett

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Freedom! Justice!

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## Prologue: Telling stories<sup>1</sup>

There are several ways I aim to use storytelling in my work. On one level I strongly believe that as an urban planner I have an obligation to tell good stories, to be able to elicit and convey empathy through the truthful telling of city-dwellers' stories. In her piece, "Out of the Closet: The Importance of Stories and Storytelling in Planning Practice", screen writer and urban planner, Leonie Sandercock makes that case that planning needs storytelling 'in order to imagine the ultimately un-representable space, life and languages of the city, to make them legible, we translate them into narratives.'<sup>1</sup>

The physical remnants of European colonialism are part of an international story that is being made legible in different ways across the world, spanning Asia, Africa and the Americas. Making connections across those stories is an important part of acknowledging this hurtful history. It is these connections that I endeavour to uncover in this essay.

The most important power of beautiful stories is in their ability to allow post-colonial places to use their shared history in ways that make what is shared into something new, resistant and hopeful. The patterns of colonial cities across the world resemble each other because the colonizers, be they English or French or Belgian, replicated their ideas of control through the city plans they made. Stories create the connections for Burma/Myanmar to learn from nearby countries in Southeast Asia but also to see alternatives in places further afield, from the ways that Bermuda or the American South have dealt with their built history.

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<sup>1</sup> All images unless otherwise noted are from Andrew Rowat: <http://andrewrowat.com/>

Sharing stories is about gaining lessons from the collective trials and errors and the iterations of practice in how to utilize and hold colonial buildings accountable. Stories are used both to connect and to make the invisible, visible. It is this power of storytelling, of wordsmithing that invites the reader in, that I am drawn to as an urbanist who believes in the power of cities to be formed by people but also to form them in return.

Creative writing, even when using non-fiction, is a form that I believe best captures urban stories, the in and out, across continents and time, the complex, confusing aspects of old cities, that other forms of writing demand I make more simple while being less lyrical. These are stories that are not taking place solely in the academe and my reflective practice means a commitment to ensuring that the thinking and writing I do be not only accessible but also enjoyable and edifying to read.

These lofty goals are not the only way that stories are at play. There is also the way colonialism is 'told.'

If a colonial building is made into a luxury hotel, or into a new government building there is a way that that history is being remembered and utilized. The 'telling' of colonial history is integral to how these spaces are sold as tourism or investment sites, resurrecting a glamorous and bygone era. For instance, what stories are being told about a country or a city through the built heritage that is saved and even more so through the *ways* that that built heritage is saved? Is the history being honoured and saved for the wealthy within the country, to create shops and cafes? Is it saved for the international elite as romanticized hotels?

Perhaps even more important is *what* version of colonialism is being told through our cities, through the people we remember by naming our streets after them, through the obvious monuments (like statues) and the less obvious urban forms (like grids that order those street). Through all these remembering and memories there is a strong undercurrent of power. The power over. The power over other people, the power to control space, the power to create spaces and select who can be in them.

As Sandercock puts it 'We need to be attentive to how power shapes which stories get told, get heard, carry weight.'<sup>ii</sup> And what is heritage but built history and the human stories that created those buildings and by inhabiting them made them real? These stories are the stuff of cities are. These stories are the stuff our experiences of cities. They matter.

It is ironically fitting then that I begin this examination of the story of preservation of colonial buildings and neighbourhoods in Yangon with the insight of a man who was an imperial police officer in British Burma and later became a famous author who wrote about Burma as well as dystopic futures. In his most famous novel, 1984, George Orwell crafts a sinister political party simply called The Party. The Party has a slogan; it goes as follows:

*'Who controls the past, controls the future: who controls the present  
controls the past.'*<sup>iii</sup>



## An Introduction to Myanmar, Burma and Yangon, Rangoon<sup>2</sup>

Let us begin with a whirlwind historical tour of Rangoon which began as a town in 1755 founded by the Burmese King Alaungpaya at the conclusion of a civil war, the reason he named his city ‘the end of strife.’

Unfortunately, the name was no protection and the city was captured in the first war with the British in 1824 only to be ceded back to the Burmese and then re-captured in a second war. It’s worth noting that it was life in Rangoon that instigated the British invasion when in 1852 complaints by British, and other merchants about corruption the local bureaucracy and taxation were the justification used to ‘invade and seize Rangoon...in the interests of guaranteeing freedom of trade for British merchants and their ships.’<sup>iv</sup>

Rangoon was ravaged, both by retreating Burmese troops setting the city alight and by British bombs from above.

Upper Burma became a colony of Britain under the local rule of the Burmese King Mindon on November 29<sup>th</sup> 1885. However, this arrangement did not last long and by New Year’s Day 1886 the Viceroy of India proclaimed Upper Burma as a realm for the Queen. On the ruins they help create the British built a new capital for British Burma—just as Rangoon had provided the justification for invasion it was the first order of business for the new colonial

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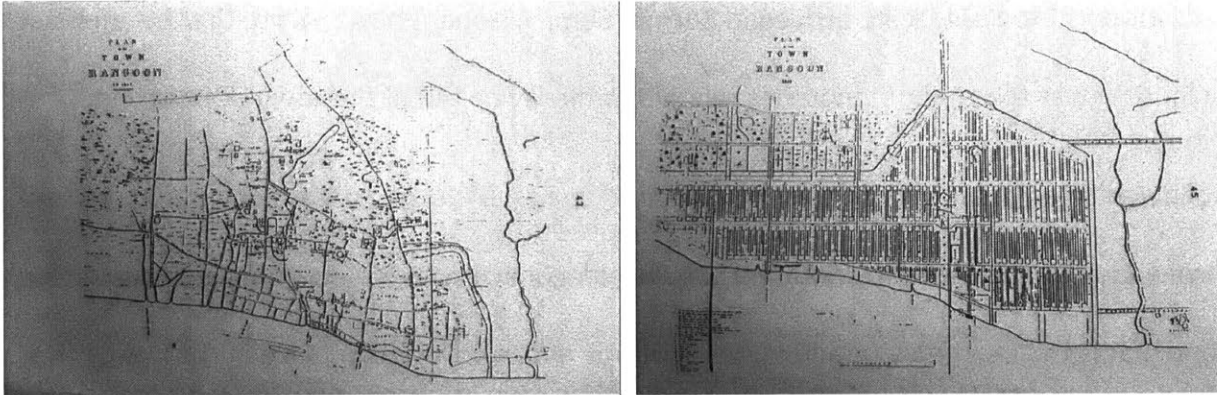
<sup>2</sup> A note of terminology: Burma and Rangoon are the British colonial names. These have been changed under the military dictatorship to Myanmar and Yangon, as rejections of the colonial past. As many reject the present dictatorship, however, many also reject this rejection. Either name is political. I use Burma and Rangoon for simplicity as these are the names referred to in the colonial era.

Commissioner. Even before he arrived in Burma, Commissioner Phayre wrote that his 'first act after landing was to set about inquiries relative to the laying out of the town of Rangoon.'<sup>v</sup>

He followed through and the colonisers imprinted an East-West grid among the many rivers of the Irrawaddy Delta, just to the South of the Shwedagon pagoda, the gleaming gold-plated pagoda that is the most holy Buddhist site in Burma and takes pride of place in the city to this day. The colonial plans of the city meant it was easily controllable and navigable by the colonial officers. The gridded plan meant that Rangoon went from what the officers saw as indigenous disarray to colonial order: 'now handily reduced to numbered and lettered parcels which could be quickly located on a map and readily understood.'<sup>vi</sup>

The urban order was a highly political act, and the reason Commissioner Phayre made it his first task was that it was through the city that he and the drafters of the street grid and land use zones 'could make Rangoon accept its new administration by inserting it physically into the town's landscape. [He] planned to make Rangoon's geography correspond with and reflect colonial policies and practices...[The] plans had to inspire Rangoon to be receptive to its new regime.'<sup>vii</sup>

Rangoon was not just an economic hub where colonial forces sought to trade unfettered. The city's very form was a tool of colonial instruction and a proclamation of the strength, grandeur and superiority of the British over the Burmese. The fact that Burmese Rangoon had been destroyed created a smouldering, if not clean, slate for these colonial ambitions and the effect was drastic, as we can see by just comparing the urban form illustrated in the maps below.



*Street maps of Rangoon in 1852 (left) and 1856 (right)<sup>viii</sup>*

The grid itself is rigid. Four streets bring wind from East to West, while fifty-two North-South streets of varying widths provide shade from the heat of the sun. Within the grid of the streets there is the further repetition of the buildings. Four floors, each fourteen feet high, make up most blocks in the city.

By the early 1900s the city was a metropolis of half a million people with an infrastructure equal to that in London.

Walk within those tightly gridded streets and the diversity of architectural styles and the variety of building uses and people demonstrate the history of a city that was never monolithic. This was not a city of British colonialists alone, nor was it Burmese. Even before the British this was a cosmopolitan city. *When an envoy for the East India Company visited in 1795 he noted 'in the same street may be heard the solemn voice of the Muezzin, calling pious Islamites to early prayers, and the bell of the Portuguese chapel tinkling a summons to Romish Christians.'*<sup>ix</sup>

Colonialism relied upon a multicultural population for trading and social control, and as Burma was under the rule of British India the colonial civil service played a role in the rapid increase of

the Indian population who during the colonial era made up 55% of the population, with the remainder including Chinese residents, British colonialists, Armenian traders and citizens from the diverse ethnic groups of modern day Myanmar. All were boxed into the British grid, yet possessed flexibility at the margins to make lasting impressions of their own onto the city fabric. These imprints, layered on top of the British grid, remain present today in the wooden shudders of the Chinese homes to the colourful gods of the Hindu temples.



*Building on 21<sup>st</sup> Street, Yangon in the Chinatown with 1900 style Chinese shutters (Bob Percival)*

The preservation of the many layered imprints on Yangon has not been completely intentional. The relative isolation of Burma after the coup led by Ne Win in 1962 closed off the external funds that enabled the destruction of colonial districts in cities like Singapore. In Singapore the Urban Redevelopment Authority had the policy of the first decade of Singapore's independence (1965-1974) that saw 'the colonial urban fabric was obliterated as an impediment to modern development.'<sup>x</sup>

As the isolation became more complete following the 1988 student uprisings and Aung Sung Suu Kyi's return and home arrest, Yangon's buildings remained frozen.

Yangon, like Havana in Cuba, was preserved at least in part by neglect. When urban renewal and car-centred planning were the urban planning methods of choice these cities were not the beneficiaries.

It would be a mistake, however, to think this neglect happened passively. Than Schwe, General of Myanmar's military created Naypyidaw, a new capital. Myanmar is not the only former colonial country to seek to shift the political, if not the economic capital away from the towns used by colonisers (Tanzania, Brazil and Nigeria all did the same).

The neglect of the colonial zone can be seen as “emblematic of the decline of external influence, intentionally underinvested in because of its history.”<sup>xi</sup>

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## Yangon: Framing the Urgency

Today the country is opening up. That's what embassies, tour companies, and newspaper travel sections are saying. As he neared the end of his presidency President Obama made time to lift the economic sanctions on the country, the official sign to the rest of the world that a new era of international attention had arrived for Myanmar. “Opening up” means more goods can flood in and people can now see Yangon, and that maybe the people of Yangon can see more of the world come into their city, too.

There is a sense of *almost* everywhere. Transformation is imminent. The street you are walking down today, with its teashops and plastic chairs and its orchids in soda bottles, will boast a Mexican restaurant in a month. The crumbling apartment building with the tell-tale red

tag marking it for demolition will be the site of a new luxury apartment building within the year. Yangon is going to change and, as with every change, there are disagreements about what must remain the same.

Multiple futures for Yangon as a city are being debated. The urgency stems from the fact that the Yangon is unique in South East Asia because it has yet to witness break-neck urban growth, silver slivers of high rises popping up seemingly overnight and gone forever the neighbourhoods of old buildings, sometimes whole villages or sometimes modest four storey apartment building.

There is an urgency in being the last to arrive at a trend. There are upsides to not being the early adapter because there is the chance to see the downsides of a past trend play out, like the awkwardness of an asymmetrically shaved haircut growing back in. There are those who argue that creating a whole new downtown by finally tearing down the tired colonial buildings is just such a haircut.

The question hinges not only this city's own heritage and history. Its present carries the weight of all the regrets and successes of heritage decisions made in Southeast Asia be. What is at stake is this: remnants of the colonial city.

Downtown Yangon is, as proclaimed in almost every tourist book or website, the last major Asian city with a significant concentrations of colonial era buildings and streetscapes. In fact, Yangon may well have 'the largest concentration of late Victorian and Edwardian architecture in the world (Britain included).'<sup>xii</sup> Hong Kong, Singapore and Jakarta all the made

the mistake of rushing to tear down their heritage buildings, both colonial and not. We're told that they regret these choices.<sup>xiii</sup>

And who is the authority, the packager of heritage? In Yangon that role has been played by the Association of Myanmar Architects (AMA) and by the Yangon Heritage Trust (YHT), both of which have published extensively on the heritage zone of downtown Yangon. AMA and YHT are leaders in Yangon's heritage landscape.<sup>xiv</sup> The Yangon Heritage Trust was set up in 2012 by Thant U Myint, the grandson of the Burmese second UN Secretary General, U-Thant. It is trying to save what remains of the grid to maintain the diversity of architecture, the wide walkable streets, the consistent attractiveness of cityscape created to present a picture of grandeur, permanence and liveability.



YHT's heritage zone map

But the differentiation and range of architectural forms is now being eroded, and the most common new type of building is the eight-floor walk-up, built in the last ten years.

What is remarkable actually is not these new developments, as ugly as they are. Yangon has never had a policy that preserves its colonial buildings. The shock is therefore how the broad fabric of the colonial city has stayed intact, while across the rest of Southeast Asia colonial remnants have been removed as a cleansing of the past, a sacrifice to modernity and quick growth.



*Example of new apartment buildings, Yangon, YHT*

It was the combination of urgency and excitement of an opening up country and the fervent discussions of urban heritage that first interested me in Yangon. I travelled there at the very end of 2016, arriving on New Year's Eve, too tired to even make it to midnight though I briefly woke to the sound of fireworks. The summer before I had worked for the World Monuments Fund, a foundation dedicated to heritage preservation, which had supported a

conference on the future of Yangon's heritage and as part of my work I had read all the conference proceedings. Curiosity then took hold.

I am a young professional, my eyes may be naïve, but there seemed a special amount of excitement about Myanmar, a place that had been hidden from the world, suddenly more accessible and perhaps more open to the many experts, investors and donors of the world. I was perplexed by the gushing about the architectural heritage and there was a nagging discomfort with the urgency to save colonial memories.

There was a tone of urgency I heard in the stories of those who had visited Burma as tourists as well as from preservation or urban historians who went professionally. I was told that I needed to go now before the country or city was 'ruined'. Ruined by tourists like me, or by eager young experts on their first development job like me and my classmates were likely to become in a year's time. This sense of impending ruin was matched by a seemingly contradictory sentiment that perhaps as a trained specialist or a young expatriate, that if I took one of the many development job vacancies posted that I could be part of staving off the ruin.

I went to Yangon as someone professionally interested in how people live in and create cities and in how to make those cities places of dignity for those who live in them. I was in the second year of a graduate program in city planning at MIT. It is in part because I lived and worked in the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Zanzibar that I returned to university—to learn how heritage might be better used for community development but also to give some time and concentrated thought to the contradictions of tourism I had seen there.

I also went to Yangon as myself, which is to say as a young Black woman who is half Kenyan and half Black American, who has lived in places that are either in the process of being 'ruined' (Zanzibar) or considered well past it (Zimbabwe). You'll notice that is no direct connection in my own biography to Burma. This may seem odd. I have no connection to this part of the world and was making my first trip to Myanmar. But when I woke up early on the first day of 2017 and set out for a walk through unfamiliar streets and an unfamiliar city, I felt—a familiarity. I saw similarities with the streets of Stonetown or Harare or Cairo. I felt a familiarity.

In many ways this essay is about that sense of recognition with other cities and places and about discomfort with the glee about colonial preservation that many Westerners evince. In many ways this essay is not really about Yangon. Instead it is about what Yangon might learn from other places. It is about the questions Yangon makes me and should make us all ask ('us' as planners but also 'us' as tourists): Why is it we want to save these colonial buildings? What version of colonialism are we saving and promoting? Would it be so bad to just tear these buildings down to begin again? What are their redeeming lessons and how do we capture those while making our cities cleave closer to the real experiences of colonialism, those of the many and not the few? How can we embrace the stories of resilience and struggle and make the city a richer, fuller place to live? Maybe even, how do our cities hold our history and shape us?

That is what this story is—an exploration of how other places have dealt with their difficult history from which Yangon and those who live there, and those who wish to visit there, can be provoked to consider.

## Difficult History

The history of colonialism and the history of African enslavement in the Americas have shared roots in the emergence of what we now call the West. The legacy of these twisted siblings echoes across the world. Finding a term for history such as this is...well difficult. The closest I have come to a term that captures the ambivalence, pain and lasting bruise of these kinds of history is this: difficult history. Colonialism and forced African labour fuelled one of the most rapid periods of development in human history at unspeakable human cost. A difficult history.

How do we engage with difficult history? How do we engage with difficult history? John Western suggests that the options include, 'changing names, neglect, removal, appropriation, and complete obliteration.'<sup>xv</sup> I would further simply this and argue that there is preserving, there is commemorating and there is erasure.

There is much that has been written about sites of terrible history, the buildings and plazas, the battlefields and prisons, of what can only be termed atrocities. Take Auschwitz or slave burial grounds or prison camps or sites of massacres. There are two options for preservation of these kinds of histories. First, efforts have been made to preserve every strip of barbed wire, to keep Mandela's cell just as it was, the cot just so.



*Photograph of Mandela's cell on Robben Island, Schwada*

These are monuments made to atone for and remember those terrible histories. They are also monuments that are often museumized and stark, there's even a term for this kind of tourism: thanatourism<sup>xvi</sup>. The second option is to create a monument to forgetting such history, to leave no mark, no building left, to raze that history to the ground, to not even think it's worth remembering maybe even build something new over it. To forget where Hitler is buried or what and where racial terror lynchings took place. Or to exhume Franco's body for fear it will become a site that is worshipped instead of a place to mourn those who died at his orders<sup>xvii</sup>.



*Unmarked site in Lagrange Georgia, where Austin Callaway was murdered in a racial terror lynching in 1940*

*(Hyosub Shin)*

But. There are many places that are so easy captured in those options.

It is easier to know that a site should be commemorated if there was a clear moment and place where the atrocity took place, if we can specifically locate the terrible history. This is why battlefields so easily come to mind as sites where terrible history is acknowledged. Battles have a delineated space and time in which they took place and the overwhelming experience of that time and place was death or suffering. We may disagree about whether it was a worthy cause, or about which side had the moral authority but creating a site that says, “People died here, for a reason that was not worthy enough to demand death” is tough to advocate against.

What do we do we with atrocities that are more—slow motion? I will never be an apologist for the enslavement of my mother’s people here in America, nor for the colonists who subjugated and stole from my father’s people in Kenya. But. The horror of colonialism and

slavery, their very *difficulty*, lies in the fact that they were constant low grade terror. Terror over tea and biscuits, terror while you till the fields, while your children grow old and once you are long gone. Colonialism and slavery were not moments, they spanned lifetimes and were the norm.

Being the norm means that the sites of power, those plantation houses or government offices were not solely filled with terror. They also were normal, banal and common place. They were filled with hours of boring filing and with moments of gentility with quickly melting ice cubes in that mint julep or gin and tonics. They were filled with magnificent dresses and with someone painting landscapes, with someone finding a new frontier in agriculture or physics or medicine or architectural design. This is what makes this kind of history difficult. It is difficult not because it was okay or moral but because it was normal. The perversity of a system that literally held certain bodies captive, indefinitely and hereditarily, was a swift undercurrent or maybe a better metaphor is that it was an odour that permeated all things, like the smoke of a camp fire. Always there, so made almost invisible.

And what do we do with this kind of difficult history? Particularly when its remnants, its physical manifestation in the form of buildings are all over the place. Here in America our landscapes, both in the North and the South, are fundamentally built on infrastructure and economies of slavery. There are the plantation houses, statues of Confederate soldiers, streets and squares named after human traffickers. Whole historic neighbourhoods, even cities are with us from that time. There are also boring stretches of fields or sleepy towns. These buildings or streets cannot all be monuments, nor, I believe, should they be. They are often working buildings with many new layers of history over the colonial or enslaved past. Another

part of the difficulty is that these buildings often have had second or third lives since those difficult pasts and I am contemplating that history today nearly 70 years after Burma became independent (1948) and over 50 years after the Civil Rights Act (1964). In the elapsing time between that past and this present people have been living and changing their cities or buildings. There are new stories over the old ones and much has changed. There are new understandings of the past, the lasting impacts are known. There is a clarity of hindsight and information that may have been difficult to find at that time—there have been years to unearth what was hidden.

But.

We would be stuck in amber if we made every building that has any taint of difficult history into a site in order to discuss only that one part of history. Because honestly every building probably has some difficult history in its closets or under its floorboards or seeped in the soil. Most buildings will have multiple difficult histories at that. In this piece I focus on colonialism and slavery because they are difficult histories that are still fresh wounds, because I think they have been allowed to fester and been ignored before they have been acknowledged for all their horror. I also focus on them because they are difficult histories that are my own histories. I feel compelled to think about them because they not easy for me to forget and because I feel some sense that if I do not, I do not know who will think through these thorny issues with me. My own history (and all narrative includes its author) means that I'm both drawn to and uniquely suited to grappling with the problem of connecting these transnational difficult histories of colonialism and enslavement and placing them firmly in the realm of the city.

Let me acknowledge that there is no single most supremely difficult history that has the right to dominate every story. There are the difficult histories of my gender, of the different families or tribes from whom I am descended. And I do not by any means have the monopoly on such history. There are many other difficult histories beyond my own history. There are difficult histories, deeply important difficult histories which I cannot lay claim to because of who my ancestors are, because of my own (claimed) identities. Undoubtedly there are difficult histories to which I am the inheritor of the perpetrator's legacy. History is filled with horrors and I can't imagine a world in which we remember them all. As Koolhaas provocatively asserts, 'preservation is overtaking us.'

Each city is a palimpsest—a physical manifestation of the accumulated layers of history. This metaphor is based on ancient writing, which had limited resources so the leather used as paper was used and reused. Scraping away the old text to make space for the new. But bits of the old were left behind as fragments or echoes within the new text. There is a word for this- palimpsest. It is an apt metaphor for the layers of history that are all around us. The buildings, the squares and the spaces that survive from hundreds of years ago are a finite resource, the product of those centuries of whispered and overlapping history. They are special.

Every place I have lived, every place you have been has layers and layers of history. Our places are palimpsests of the past and the people who lived, and died before us. These human stories matter but these places are also in the present my homes and my story.

There is also real temptation to only speak about these new layers. More than that there is also a real threat inherent to which layers are brought to the surface and the intentions or impacts of that telling of history.

How do you choose which history should be made visible and preserved? It is deceptively simple: It should be the history that matters.

The question is matters to whom? And why?

The answer is, it matters to whomsoever has power. Power is what allows you to be the one who decides what matters. Power is what lets the victors write the history books but also lets the victors have monuments to their victories. Power.

And like it or not power is often hereditary.

## Tourism, Colonial Nostalgia and Historical Fantasy

Often, though not exclusively, money is the key to having the power to have power *over* I discussed in the prologue. For urban heritage preservation in Yangon, large influxes of money and power are coming from tourism.

The World Bank now encourages countries in the Global South to preserve cultural heritage for economic reasons that can be summarised as: drawing tourists with global competition means a city's uniqueness is paramount, keeping young professionals and a creative class, sustainability and liveability (related to the first two, people like to visit and live cities that were built on a more human scale, with mixed use neighbourhoods and districts that are walkable).<sup>xviii</sup>

Tourism is one of the most compelling driver of the planning of Rangoon. Tourism is on also opening up and volumes have more than tripled between 2012 and 2015 and look to continue rising.

What is forgotten in these claims, particularly in the first two points that rely on the economic driving power of tourists and young people, is that the purchasing power of the powerful in this model is not ahistorical, not apolitical.

Merely ignoring the past and bowing to the present day economic incentives does not remove that the many stories of history that took place. Visitors, in rapidly escalating volumes, are frequently from former colonial countries and their visits to Yangon are punctuated with opportunities to see the only near-replica of a colonial city remaining in Southeast Asia. This should give pause for thought. The visitor may very well be literally the descendants of colonisers, coming to pay Burmese people to act out a colonial fantasy in buildings that have been preserved to make that fantasy as believable as possible.

A stark example of the impact of tourists on the telling of history on yet another land scarred by both colonialism and enslavement can be found in Bermuda. This island went from plantations (agricultural production using enslaved labourers) ending in 1834 to today's economy, which dependent on finance and the transport of new bodies to its shores from foreign lands, though this time they now majority white tourists from the United States visiting as tourists to see the island's history while on the way to the beach. Most of these tourists arrive on cruise ships, departing onto the islands for just for day-trips to wander the quaint colonial streets.

They are coming, not for a history lesson but for a break. They are not alone, for what is tourism but a kind of branded, or let's say *curated* version of a place, high on details that

delight in their uniqueness but padded out with enough recognized comforts to make it enjoyable, and create a thread of relatability?

Maybe even-better-than-home comforts: more luxurious, more catered and more...civilized. The difference between Bermuda and New Jersey is offered up, balanced by comfort. Slight risk, bigger rewards. In an age when part of the fun of travel is the pictures poured over and envied by others, having a unique experience is paramount. You want something beautiful that has echoes of home but echoes only the most pleasant, interesting or luxurious parts of home.

I think there is a tug, and here I will implicate myself and my own travel lusts—there is a tug to see something that educational, that spurs some feeling of specialness too. So when I travel I am not interested in frat-boy riddled Cancun. Give me some temples or artsy cafes, give me streets that make me feel like I know what old New York felt like to walk through, so I can feel the way my body is proportioned to that past without any of the danger that would have been part of actually being a black female body in the past.

And the me today—this body is a consumer, a potential customer, a discerning particular one at that. One with a glut of choices around the world, small cities, rural temples, rice paddies, beaches, urban squares potentials to see everywhere. Only a cheap flight away. How to get me to spend my dollars? How do you get me to spend them with you and in your place?

You pitch and you curate and you try to convince me that this is the cool place and that I am discerning and interesting for having chosen it.

There is a very thin line, if one exists, between telling the unique history of a place and curating that unique history so that it is palatable. There are very few places that have been able to capitalize on telling a brutal history, the Gold Coast, comes to mind. More places want to both be unique and unthreatening. This balancing act all too often leads to the packaging of history into comfortable wisps of nostalgia.

## Colonial Nostalgia

“To think with ruins of empire is to emphasize less the artefacts of empire as dead matter or remnants of a defunct regime than to attend to their appropriations and strategic and active positioning within the politics of the present. To focus on the ruins is to broach the protracted quality of decimation in people’s lives to trade the production of new exposures and enduring damage” (Stoler 2008, p.196)

Here I want to talk about the gravitation pull towards remembering or at least packaging the colonial built history in a swirl of happy memories—the selling of the colonial era as a time of cosmopolitanism, of luxury, comfort and class, an almost quaint time of civility.

What has changed today is the *access* to this world. Now you can have access even if you are Burmese, or Black or a woman. Hey, you can even have access even if you are not rich in your everyday life.

As tourism sells this selective vision of colonialism told as a positive time that was not available to everyone, but don’t think about that part too much because today it is available to you. It is available to you for a weeklong vacation or for as short a time as a drink (make it a gin

and tonic or better yet a Raffles hotel designed concoction). This vision is not unique to any particular post-colonial nation so we can learn how it is activated in other places with colonial history.

In Bermuda, a nation where colonial nostalgia is even more stark because the country is still not independent but remains, instead, a self-governing British Overseas Territory and thus is part of the British Empire (though that word is no longer used). In Bermuda the nostalgic colonial vision has created what Brent Fortenberry calls a 'liminal state' with a heritage landscape dominated by physical remnants of British institutions that are 'in turn packaged for visitors.'<sup>xix</sup>

*Rosewood Tucker's Point croquet lawn, Bermuda<sup>xx</sup>*



The case of Bermuda is stirring because of its starkness, the continued colony-lite status as well as its high level of dependence on tourism. Bermuda's economy is largely comprised of the annual income of 90 million dollars through docking fees and dependence in turn shapes the packaging of the heritage.<sup>xxi</sup> The 'inherent challenge' in Bermuda is in order to make the most convincing pitch to those most likely to be tourists, it is necessary to promote [Bermuda's] colonial British heritage.<sup>xxii</sup> This packaging for the tourist consumer leads us to ever more damning questions about who are tourists and particularly, who are 'good' tourists or moneyed tourists who wish to consume heritage.

The power of nostalgias of these kinds is that they are not just a slight untruth but a powerful retelling. There is a reason that when people in tourism speak about preservation of colonial districts they speak about 'revival' and 'revitalization' both words which are about giving new life. There is a worry in preserving and breathing new life not just into the buildings but also into ideologies like colonialism and slavery. I'm not sure that we can separate the lifestyles possible in those eras from the ways those lifestyles were constructed. The worry is that the nostalgia is not just for a 'colonial ambiance' but for colonialism itself. Even if it is unintentional this kind of tourism can, through redeeming this particular culture of travel, redeem it 'in such a way that the inherent violence of its dispositions is lost from view. Colonialism is recuperated—and rehabilitated—at a distance...[through an] 'inflated truth' whose manifestations fill the visual frame and crowd out the other figures' as Derek Gregory puts it<sup>xxiii</sup>.

## Weddings in Plantation Houses and Gin and Tonics like a Colonial Officer

Part of my motivating concern about how colonial buildings are treated comes from some deeply uncomfortable encounters with nostalgia for a past that seemed suspiciously devoid of criticism. If we don't think about how to thoughtfully engage with this history then we can end up at the mercy of murderous market forces. These buildings can become the sites of a radical and violently untrue version of colonial or antebellum life—a shift from memorializing or commemorating to glorifying.



Rhodes Nyanga Hotel Veranda<sup>xxiv</sup>

This tendency to play up the notion of gentility affected me first as a child in Zimbabwe. I used to desperately wish to visit the Rhodes Nyanga Hotel. Then I did not know about the legacy of Cecil Rhodes (long may he fall), but I did know I wanted high tea, cucumber sandwiches, see the old luggage used by those who “fitted” in such a hotel. I would beg my

mother to take us so that we could run across the lawns overlooking the views of Nyanga. The history I saw was not one of conquest and profiteering, but of sophistication, of something I wished I had and admired.

Two years ago while in Zanzibar, the building next to my house was popular for sundown drinks, a favourite pastime of foreign expats with at least a bit of disposable income and tourists alike.

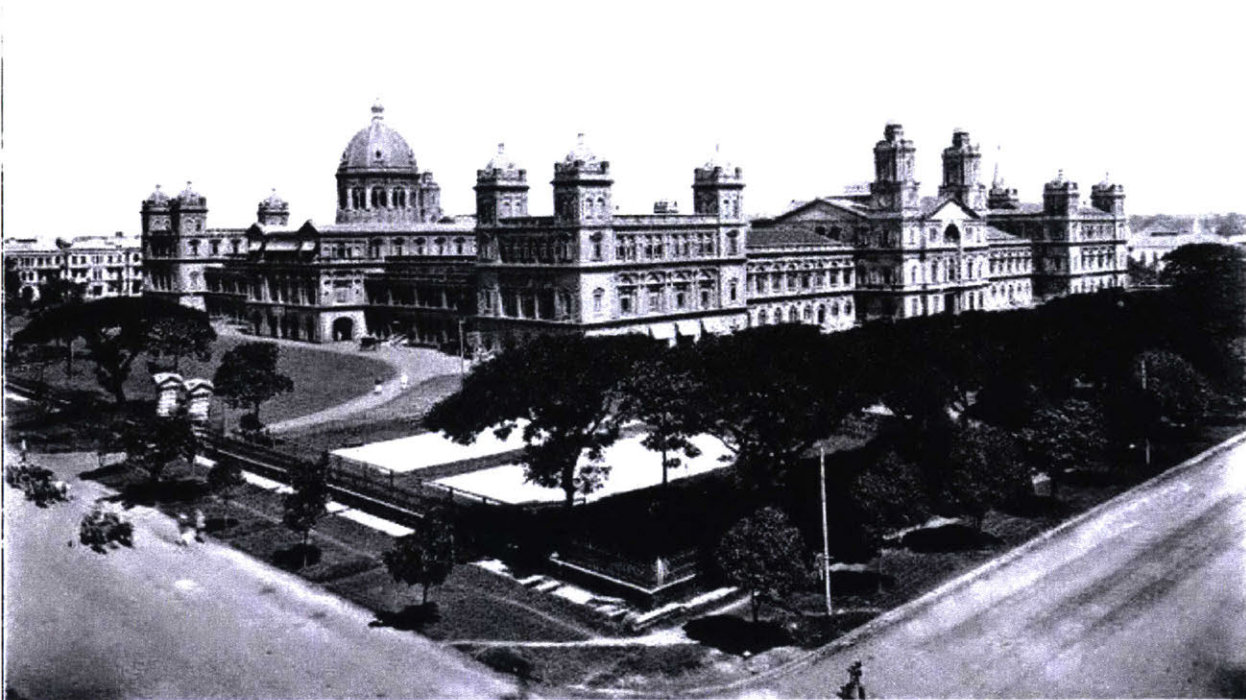
The hotel was on the Italian tour package route and so was always full with people in beach wear, slightly sunburnt and smelling of salt, all crowded in tight on the balcony overlooking the sea with its picturesque dhows sailing out for the evening. The balcony would be reasonably full 20 minutes before sunset (a very predictable range between 6 and 6:30 that close to the equator) when it would be swarmed and overfull as dusk neared. There would be tiers of people taking pictures over each other's questionably braided hair, the whole place a-flutter with the imitation shutter sounds of digital cameras.

This was the so called "Africa House," like all else in Stonetown it was hidden in the winding streets and alleyways, a mass of a building that did not appear close to the sea until you were up the flight of stairs looking at it over a wide balcony, to the aptly named Sunset Bar. The décor was dated, dated precisely to the middle of the British protectorate. Then, 1888, it was the English Club, a place to well...have a sundowner with other colonial officers, much as hundreds of years later I would with my expat friends. I was not allowed to forget this history, was in fact encouraged to reminisce with all the portraits of young pale men in uniform and the murmured group orders for gins and tonics.

## Fanciful Telling

In these places that are steeped in a highly fanciful telling, an almost amnesia about the past, there is a commercialization and experience-ization of colonial history. Just as the Grimm Brothers' fairy tales lost their bite and much of their darkness in the translation into Disney, so too is history not so much about what happened then what some of us would like to think happened. The gulags and the racism are not hotel or luxury apartment fare, it is glamorous to remember the gentlemanly day drinking and the expert cocktails that doubled as malaria prophylaxis. So the old colonial office is naturally a bar with gentile drinks with large ice cubes chipped off a block served, preferably, by a waiter wearing a uniform that is appropriately vague in its allusion to the colonial period.

But this is insidious telling of history. It tells us that we can forget the horrors because they are over and now we, even we Black Africans can now have access to the joys. It tells us to remember the way travel used to be, with matching trunks and beautiful hats while asking us to please excuse or better yet, look away and forget experiences the sea sickness and the noisy planes. Don't ask who was carrying those trunks, what they were paid, where they were forced ('allowed') to live, what their lives' sacrifice was to create that patina of luxury.



xxv

## Removing the difficult history of enslavement and confederacy

I am struck with how timely my questioning of difficult history is now in the days of the Trump presidency which bring almost daily examples<sup>3</sup> of the power and tensions of contested, fabricated and valorised history.

Make America Great Again is itself a harkening to a heritage that many feel does not exist or is pigmentally particular about whom it permits. Just as I am in the throes of bringing the

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<sup>3</sup> Here in Spring, 2017

threads of this piece together Trump reimagines a Civil War history in which, perhaps (racist, enslaver, pillar of American History) Andrew Jackson is still alive and livid about War, so livid he would stop it. Expert historians rush to combat or massage history (Jackson was over a decade dead when the War began) the President's suggestion that the War could have been negotiated ad art of the dealed. Op-eds spring up questioning how we remember history and what the heritage is.

But this kind of flurry of concern is commonplace now. What hit me in the guts was what is happening in New Orleans.

New Orleans's Mayor Mitch Landrieu is standing in the sun holding a press conference about monuments. But this is no ribbon cutting ceremony, instead he is here to explain why his government has moved forward with the removal of a monument to supporters of the Confederacy. The statue to the Crescent White League, a commemorative statue and the subject of years of legal battles, has been dismantled and torn down.

Torn down in the dead of night, surrounded, news reports say, by police in flak jackets. The workers doing the removal have covered their company's logo on all the trucks and are themselves wearing face masks. There are protective snipers on surrounding roof tops. Snipers to protect the people who will remove this stone obelisk.

This is serious, dangerous business.

There have been threats, violent threats, against those who are involved in the removal process for this, and three other planned removals. The Mayor has fierce words that the removal is a chance to 'truly remember all of our history not just some of it...[S]howing the

whole world that we as a city and a people are able to acknowledge, understand, reconcile and, most importantly, choose a better future. Making straight what has been crooked and right what has been wrong.”

This is a speech obviously not just about this one monument but a call to come together to all say “we will no longer allow the Confederacy to literally be put on a pedestal in the heart of our city”, not New Orleans nor any other city. This is a white male mayor of a major American city, a place that thrives off tourism, including nostalgia tourism, who is saying these things.



It is something to behold and it has not come out of nowhere. It has come about because of a movement led by #Take'EmDownNOLA (whose poster is above). They have a list and a map of Confederate monuments through the City, they have a petition and have hosted demonstrations all towards their central call to 'TAKE DOWN ALL SYMPBOLS OF WHITE SUPREMACY" from the names of streets, to statues, to the names of institutions such as Tulane University (whose map notes is 'named after Paul Tulane, the largest Louisiana financier to the Confederacy.')

They have a list of demands:

We the people of New Orleans demand that the Mayor and City Council take immediate action to remove all monuments, school names and street signs dedicated to White Supremacists. These structures litter our city with visual reminders of the horrid legacy of slavery that terrorized so many of this city's ancestors. They misrepresent our community. We demand the freedom to live in a city

where we are not forced to pay taxes for the maintenance of public symbols that demean us and psychologically terrorize us. We demand:

1. That the city release a timeline for the immediate removal of the monuments;
2. That the city expand the definition from 4 specific monuments to encompass all monuments to White Supremacy;
3. That the city develop a community driven process for the removal of the monuments and the choosing of their replacements.

There is a fight happening over memories in this city over the subtle and not so subtle monuments to slavery as an institution through the honouring of those who profited, spread and defended the right of one set of people to traffic, hold hostage, torture and control the lives of another set of people. It's a fight over how we remember those people, if we hold them accountable or if we allow them pedestals.

Take 'Em Down NOLA is cognisant of the strangeness of this kind of battle when there are more visceral, corporeal attacks happening to the descendants of enslaved people. They have a Why It Matters tab. They know the importance of removing these monuments but also of justifying this line of attack by explaining why we should care about an old statue when there is police brutality or deportations to combat.

And this is important. Monuments littered across a city carry a corporeal impact—I have lived my life on streets that bear the names of people who would not have thought me human. Should I go to a university that bears the name of one of those who donated to stop my being equal to paler citizens?

This is a battle I care about as an urbanist because it is about the making of our cities but also about the living of them.

It matters who designed, and who was designed for, in the making of the places we call home.

## So then, imagine a street in Yangon

Taking the lessons from places from Bermuda to Kuala Lumpur, what should happen in Yangon?

The first step is to say upfront that I cannot tell the people of Yangon what they should do. Nor should I feel I should. There are so many things I do not know or understand as an outsider. The decisions and plans should not be made from the outside but should emerge from messy disagreement and debate in Yangon. The second thing is perhaps contradictory

It helps to think on a smaller scale, to imagine the future and preservation of specific buildings. This specificity is not only easier to imagine than complex history; specificity is the point. There are many dishonesties involved in colonial nostalgia but perhaps the most egregious is the use of broad strokes, moulding the history of Singapore to be no different from that of Yangon. The vagueness extends to taking the experience of the most elite of the elite and selling it as a norm.

It's useful to return to Western's menu of options 'changing names, neglect, removal, appropriation, and complete obliteration.' What does preservation look like for the Edwardian and Victorian heritage of Yangon if we set out to be specific about the history of a site, instead of choosing the nostalgia?

The site of the most intense recent disputes has been the former Ministers' Building of both colonial and independent governments, the Secretariat building. The capital of British Burma, this superblock spans six streets from West to East from Bo Aung Kyaw Street. The

building was not only the capital of colonial oppression but the headquarters of independence, and then also the site on which Aung San, the national hero, first leader and father of Aung San Suu Kyi, was murdered, along with six of his cabinet members in 1947.

Closed for the last twelve years since the military government moved the capital to Naypyidaw, few people enter or walk around the grand corridors that held so many years of power and struggle. The building has been declining, despite an effort at restoration in 2011 by the government.

In 2012, however, the government put the building out to tender for private use: proposals were received to turn it into another hotel, like the Strand or the Governor's Residence but hugely larger, and a shopping mall prompting protests on the streets outside the closed gates of the building.



In response to these protests the contract was awarded to the Anamwar Art Group, a company owned by the family of former general Tun Kyi. This bid proposed the creation a gallery for art and culture. Yet five years later this remains just a theory.

The building was open (a rare occurrence) while I was in Yangon. I went to a one-day opening in January when the building was opened for an exhibition, saw the mould growing on interior walls, the rot setting in to bannisters, the grand spaces, but there is still no full discussion of how to preserve this intensely complex history and yet make the space usable in the present. The square could represent the largest park in the Eastern section of the grid, while also working to preserve a memory of both the good and the bad of Burmese history: from colonialism, through independence, tragedy and military rule.

But it is this difficulty that is leaving the building frozen beyond the rest of the city: a history too intense to forget, but also too awful in specifics to be overwritten in the way merely tough histories can be. This is a site that has the time and place specificity, like a battlefield that asks for commemoration.

For an example of appropriation, we can look to the former Irrawaddy Flotilla Building in downtown Yangon.

The company was a private public partnership long before we spoke of endeavours that way. A private company that did much of the labour of colonialism, moving goods and people around, reaping profits. At the height the company claimed to have “The Largest Fleet of Inland Steamers Operating in the World”, six hundred vessels carrying goods out of Burma.



This building, therefore, was central to the machine of extraction. But when colonialism was brought to its knees and Burma was its own it became something only slightly new: when it became the government's office for the Inland Water Transport Board on June 1<sup>st</sup> 1948.

This difficult history has been partly subsumed by its present, its role remains the same, but rather than working to extract surpluses *from* the Burmese people, now (at least in the last five years) it works *for* them.

But at the same time as history has paralysed action around the Secretariat and been handled well at the Inland Water Transport Board, tourism is a growing threat to appropriate usage of history in Yangon as a whole. The top three hotels on Tripadvisor in Rangoon today are all appealing to guests using colonial nostalgia (The Strand – “one of Asia’s most enduring and awe-inspiring Colonial landmarks” - the Governor’s Residence – “A romantic, colonial-style mansion dating from the 1920s, Belmond Governor's Residence is redolent of the days when it

was home to the ruler of Myanmar's southern states” – and The Savoy – a “colonial boutique hotel”).<sup>xxvi</sup> All have been restored in the last ten years and are benefitting from the opening up.

Burma therefore has a problem in how it’s dealing with its history while it opens up.

It is losing its heritage for residents, as complications around property rights lead to households unable to keep up their buildings and replacing them if possible with consistently terrible new builds.

At the same time, it is selling its worst history to those happy to understand it both incorrectly and offensively because they have the money to buy it. This is the opposite of what should be happening.

Rangoon has the opportunity to use its existing physical heritage to make a future that understands its past but looks forward. If this opportunity is missed in the rush to compete for tourist dollars, not only all Burmese people but all tourists will be the worse off for embracing a potted history that celebrates an impossible nostalgia for colonialism.

## My hopes

Knowing what I now know about nostalgia and its power to beguile and to obscure history, I can say only what I as an individual, with all my personal and professional experiences, hope will be the process by which Yangon decides what to do with its colonial architecture and neighbourhood. I was asked when I was just beginning to formulate this project to think about how this is a different thesis from the one I would have written two years ago without this times in thought, in classes and in conversation framed by being in graduate school. It is a

question that I have returned to over and over and as I come to the end of my essay I feel I have an answer: the commitment to crafting processes and not solutions has been at the heart of all my new understandings.

It is not a new observation but it holds true for me that the more I have learnt the more I can acknowledge I do not know. There are intricate histories layered in the palimpsest of Yangon, layers which I cannot know after studying it for a year, but I think it is more important to note that even if I had been born a planner in the heart of the historic colonial area of Yangon, even then I would not know the layers of difficult and beautiful histories that my neighbour in the same place would know.

It is a fierce beauty of cities and of the people who form and constantly recreate them, a fierce beauty of complexity in proximity.

What do I hope happens in Yangon?

I want urban planners to be aware and wary of the power they wield to tell history in the present. This is, after all, when we remember history and although much of the power of difficult histories is in the oft-invisible systems and structures they have created, there is still incredible power in the physical manifestations of that difficult history. The metaphor of an iceberg or of a mushroom is apt—the small visible form tells us there is a larger system below. That, in my view, is the where built heritage is: the ability to hold more histories than we can tell in words, to indicate that there is more below and to invite us to follow those trails.

This power means that urban planners, urbanists, must be vigilant and constantly learning which histories are being advanced and what ideologies are served through that

advancement. The Yangon Heritage Trust (a non-governmental organization) and the Yangon City Development Committee (the governmental body responsible for urban policies) and other heritage actors such as Turquoise Mountain<sup>xxvii</sup>, Doh Eain<sup>xxviii</sup> among others must name colonial nostalgia as well as their commitment to curbing it. These groups must acknowledge the negative histories of colonialism and I must believe that this acknowledgement will not detract from their argument to protect these buildings. On the contrary that this honestly will strengthen it by shirking nostalgia for the far more interesting stories of how people, all the many different people and peoples who have and still call Rangoon/Yangon home, how they resisted and adapted and made the city far more than its colonial urban planners imagined it could be.

The responsibility for telling difficult histories does not only fall on heritage groups and urban officials. I must also call upon the tourist as a central actor in the propagation of nostalgia for colonialism. Tourists create the demand for hotels such as the Strand to play up the glamor of colonial ambiance with none of the bite of reality to cut the saccharine cloud. I understand the temptation to see holidays and time touring as somehow outside the bounds of time and reality. A time to ignore news of today and the horrors the past. But tourists cannot claim innocence when the new reality created for them is built on very real world ideologies which have harmed those subjugated by colonialism or enslaved. There are more than the two options of either 1) exposing all the horror of history or 2) to telling a fantasy Disney version of history. There are ways to tell difficult stories which are uplifting and hopeful while also being honest. Tourists must support place that tell these nuanced stories. More than just waiting for a supply of complex histories tourists must demand that such stories are told. They can do so by

say asking why the pictures in the lobby of a grand hotel have a preponderance of images of white colonial officers or why high tea does not include the culinary adaptations of the specific place.

These are my more abstract hopes for Yangon. That the government and NGOs that work on heritage will seek out multiple histories instead of looking for soothing nostalgia. There are signs of these groups seeking to ensure that the heritage of Yangon is benefiting those who live there. Turquoise Mountain has completed a renovation of a building in the heritage zone without displacing the residents or the businesses that have long used the building. They are also investing in traditional Burmese jewellery design and production, protecting local skills even if the market for the products is largely foreign. The Yangon Heritage Trust must be commended for explicitly linking heritage preservation to the lives of those who live in the area—arguing for increased liveability through a mixture of preservation and new designs (such as a waterfront park).

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<sup>i</sup> Sandercock, Leonie. "Out of the closet: The importance of stories and storytelling in planning practice." p.12

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.* p.12

<sup>iii</sup> Orwell, George. *Nineteen eighty-four*, p.37

<sup>iv</sup> Maxim, Sarah Heminway. "The resemblance in external appearance: the colonial project in Kuala Lumpur and Rangoon." P.25

<sup>v</sup> *Ibid.* p.30

<sup>vi</sup> *Ibid.* p.49

<sup>vii</sup> *Ibid.* p.32

<sup>viii</sup> *Ibid.*, 43-45

<sup>ix</sup> *Ibid.* p.36

<sup>x</sup> Peleggi, M. "The Social and Material Life of Colonial Hotels: Comfort Zones as Contact Zones in British Colombo and Singapore, ca. 1870-1930." P.257

<sup>xi</sup> Cheer, Joseph M., and Keir J. Reeves. "Colonial heritage and tourism: ethnic landscape perspectives." P.153

<sup>xixixi</sup> Peleggi, M. "The Social and Material Life of Colonial Hotels: Comfort Zones as Contact Zones in British Colombo and Singapore, ca. 1870-1930." P.258

<sup>xiii</sup> Founding father and former Prime Minister of Singapore Lee Kuan Yew said as much during a speech to the World Travel and Tourism Council Dinner in 1995 < <http://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/speeches/record-details/7431d101-115d-11e3-83d5-0050568939ad> >

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- <sup>xiv</sup> Fortenberry, Brent. "Life Among Ruins, Bermuda and Britain's Colonial Heritage."
- <sup>xv</sup> Western, John. "Undoing the Colonial City?"
- <sup>xvi</sup> Thanatourism: coined by A.V. Seatan from the Greek 'thanatos' for death, also known as 'dark tourism.' Tourism to sites of death, violence or sadness.
- <sup>xvii</sup> As reported in the Wall Street Journal (accessed from <https://www.wsj.com/articles/spanish-vote-calling-for-francos-exhumation-revives-old-divisions-1494527324> May 14th 2017)
- <sup>xviii</sup> World Bank Group, "**The Economics of Uniqueness: Embracing Cultural Heritage**" (accessed from <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2012/09/26/economics-uniqueness-embracing-cultural-heritage> May 14th, 2017)
- <sup>xix</sup> Fortenberry, Brent. "Life Among Ruins, Bermuda and Britain's Colonial Heritage." P.602
- <sup>xx</sup> Found at: <http://www.travelgolf.com/departments/photo-galleries/rosewood-tuckers-point-resort-bermuda-12939.htm>
- <sup>xxi</sup> *Ibid.* p.603
- <sup>xxii</sup> *Ibid.* p.602
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Gregory, D., "Colonial Nostalgia and Cultures of Travel: Spaces of Constructed Visibility in Egypt," Ch. 5. In "Consuming Tradition, Manufacturing Heritage," p.114
- <sup>xxiv</sup> [https://www.accommodirect.com/media/thumbnails/pictures/places/18199/DSC03119.jpg.800x470\\_q75\\_upscale.jpg](https://www.accommodirect.com/media/thumbnails/pictures/places/18199/DSC03119.jpg.800x470_q75_upscale.jpg)
- <sup>xxv</sup> <http://discoverydmc.com/blog/>
- <sup>xxvi</sup> [https://www.tripadvisor.com/Hotels-g294191-Yangon\\_Rangoon\\_Yangon\\_Region-Hotels.html](https://www.tripadvisor.com/Hotels-g294191-Yangon_Rangoon_Yangon_Region-Hotels.html), <http://www.hotelthestrands.com/>, <https://www.belmond.com/governors-residence-yangon/luxury-hotel>, <https://www.savoy-myanmar.com/> (all accessed May 14<sup>th</sup>, 2017)
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Turquoise Mountain: <http://turquoisemountain.org/myanmar>
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Doh Eain <http://www.doheain.com/>

## Literature Review<sup>4</sup>

There is a long history of preservation and creative reuse of ancient buildings all around the world, from Europe's Roman ruins to continual building of the Great Mosque of Djenné since the 13<sup>th</sup> Century. There is no doubt that there was heritage, and respect for it, long before the United Nations and Bretton Wood institutions came into being. However, it is important to note the more modern institutionalization of heritage and the legal frameworks used to codify it. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) was created in 1946 as an international body to prioritize heritage. Today it has 195 member states and nine associate members. The mission of the institution is embodied in its 1972 international treaty, the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage<sup>5</sup>. This treaty seeks to 'encourage the identification, protection and preservation of cultural and natural heritage around the world considered of outstanding value to humanity.'<sup>6</sup>

One of the central programs of UNESCO is to designate sites across the globe as World Heritage Sites, that is sites that are of 'universal value'.<sup>7</sup> These sites are separated into those with cultural or natural significance. Designation by UNESCO as an official site affords these locales some legal protection in times of war under the Geneva Convention. The designation also comes with global recognition of a site's value and technical assistance from UNESCO. Perhaps more appealing than legal designation or assistance, there is significant evidence that inscription into

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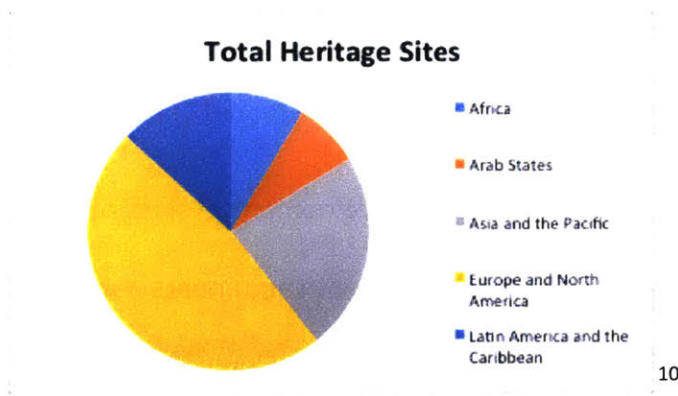
<sup>4</sup> A note on the structure of this essay: It is unusual to conclude and not begin with the review of literature. I have organized this essay this way because the literature review is very much an academic device and I felt would change the tone of the essay if I began with it. It should be seen instead as a kind of appendix to the essay for those who want more grounding in the academe.

<sup>5</sup> <http://whc.unesco.org/en/conventiontext/> (accessed May 17<sup>th</sup>, 2017)

<sup>6</sup> <http://whc.unesco.org/en> (accessed May 17<sup>th</sup>, 2017)

<sup>7</sup> (UNESCO, <http://whc.unesco.org/en/criteria/>). (accessed May 17<sup>th</sup>, 2017)

the List of World Heritage Sites comes with considerable increases in tourism and thus the revenues of that industry.<sup>8</sup> Historically there has been overrepresentation of sites in Europe, reflecting Christian heritage or of ‘elitist’ architecture<sup>9</sup>. Although there have been advances made in the past two decades to include sites from the developing world Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean and Asia and the Pacific (geographic categories used by UNESCO), data still show a disproportionately low number of Cultural Heritage sites in the developing world. See chart below for Total Sites.



Herwitz’s work on the manufacturing of post-colonial identity and the selection of specific history as heritage can be seen as a rich subset of work on nation building and is a connection to work such as Graham’s “Heritage and Identity” which focus on the use of performative aspects of heritage.

<sup>8</sup> (World Heritage Magazine, Part Threat, Part Hope: The Challenge of Tourism).

<sup>9</sup> UNESCO, Global Strategy for a Representative, Balanced and Credible World Heritage list, 1994

(<http://whc.unesco.org/en/globalstrategy/>) This is monumental architecture seen in contrast to ‘vernacular’ architecture—it’s perhaps best illustrated with an example: in Zanzibar the Stonetown is where homes were made with the largest proportion of coral rock, an expensive item. Although the houses made outside the heritage zone used similar architectural techniques they were smaller and less expensive to construct and rarely used architects as the designers.

<sup>10</sup> Created on December 12<sup>th</sup>, 2015 based on UNESCO data, <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/stat> (accessed May 17<sup>th</sup>, 2017)

## Changes in Treatment of Heritage in Development

The change in the 1990s to have more proportional representation of countries from the developing world did not immediately permeate the work of other development-focused Programs (UNDP) or Specialized Agencies (World Bank, IMF). There was no urban Millennium Development Goal and with the end of their tenure in early 2015 there was an opportunity to place urban development more centrally. Built and cultural heritage have been seen as acceptable collateral damage for the aims of development. Heritage continued to be sidelined in development arenas as it continued to be seen, from both heritage and development organizations, as irrelevant to development, if not in direct conflict with it.

There has long been silence on the part of these development professionals about the use or usefulness of heritage in bringing about development. With arguments about basic needs versus capacities there was little attention given to the value for developing countries preserving their culture and monuments as they raced towards modernity, rather than making the state legible to central administrations.<sup>11</sup> There was far more focus on how culture might be changed in order to better align with Western industrialization or trade or economy.<sup>12</sup> In many ways silence around heritage is not surprising: in Hegelian thought the past can be seen as the antithesis of development or modernization, an idea of development which Mazlish describes as

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<sup>11</sup> Scott, J., *Seeing Like a State*, p.195

<sup>12</sup> See as recent as the World Bank's 2015 *World Development Report on Mind, Society and Behavior*, which while rejecting older forms of cultural determinism nonetheless sets out to explain how to change cultural frames to improve development outcomes.

'cumulative, expansive and progressive.'<sup>13</sup> The suggestion is that difficult sacrifices of the old must be made to make way for the new, both in terms of physical buildings but also with culture.

Furthermore, lest we believe that it is only development officials who have shied away from heritage-based development, the conservationists have tended to focus on development only as a threat to heritage. This remains the case today, as the 30 Cultural World Heritage Sites listed as 'In Danger' a full third are from the developing world.<sup>14</sup> A typical but telling description of the situation was given in 2010 by Lazare Eloundou, the head of UNESCO's office in Bamako, Mali, when he said:

"One of the major problems is that the issue of protection and conservation of heritage sometimes conflicts with the need for infrastructure and resources exploitation. We need a fair balance, and it seems that this is going to be one of the major conservation issues in the coming years."<sup>15</sup>

In 2010 China's top cultural official made headlines for speaking out against frenetic urban development creating the 'most difficult, grave and critical period' for cultural heritage in China.<sup>16</sup> Southeast Asian cities including Hong Kong, Kuala Lumpur have been witnessed rapid urban growth, often with the explicit urban development strategies against old urban fabrics with an obvious example to be found in Singapore's Urban Redevelopment Authority policies under which 'colonial urban fabric was obliterated as an impediment to modern development'

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<sup>13</sup> Mazlish, p.456

<sup>14</sup> <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/stat/#s7>

<sup>15</sup> Lazare Eloundou, head of UNESCO's office in Bamako, Mali (as quoted in CNN, <http://www.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/africa/12/06/unesco.africa.concern/>)

<sup>16</sup> Shan Jixiang as quoted in the Guardian "China heritage chief says building boom is destroying country's heritage", Tania Branigan, 4 August 2010

in the first years after independence (post 1965).<sup>17,18</sup> More globally, the World Monument Fund, a nongovernmental heritage watchdog, annual creates a list of 50 World Monuments they list as in grave danger. Of these, more than 50% list development as a key element of threat.<sup>19</sup>

In recent years, however, groups such as the World Bank and UNESCO have begun tying heritage to economic development. Both heritage and development agencies are now pointing towards heritage's potential for development, with UNESCO noting "cultural heritage is increasingly preserved and promoted as a tool for development."<sup>20</sup> UNDP has indicated that 'culture can clearly facilitate economic growth through job creation, tourism and the cultural industries' with culture as an economic sector for production, consumption and access.'<sup>21</sup>

The commitments to more equally represent the developing world's heritage came at the same time as the World Bank and development economists began to describe heritage as an 'asset.' The World Bank's contribution to heritage development was particularly indicative of the strength this framing of heritage has gained. The Bank's 2012 report, "The Economic Benefits of Uniqueness: Investing in Historic City Cores and Cultural Heritage Assets for Sustainable Development," offered a primer for using and understand heritage as an asset for economic development. This primarily focuses on the benefits of heritage for development: that is, it views

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<sup>17</sup> Maxim, Sarah Heminway. "The resemblance in external appearance: the colonial project in Kuala Lumpur and Rangoon." P.45

<sup>18</sup> Peleggi, Maurizio. "Consuming colonial nostalgia: The Monumentalisation of Historic Hotels in Urban South-East Asia." P.257

<sup>19</sup> World Monument Fund, [https://www.wmf.org/explore/site\\_type/world-monuments-watch-111/watch\\_year/2016-66?keyword=Development](https://www.wmf.org/explore/site_type/world-monuments-watch-111/watch_year/2016-66?keyword=Development)

<sup>20</sup> (Paper 31, 99).

<sup>21</sup> (2007c. UNDP).

heritage as an asset within the very established framework of the ultimate goal for all developing countries being the achievement of Western capitalist development.

As further proof that heritage and development are now taken as natural partners, the Sustainable Development Goals, crafted in 2015, unlike the Millennium Goals before them have an urban development agenda. As part of “Goal 11: Make Cities inclusive, safe and sustainable” there is Target 11.4 which calls for: ‘making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable by strengthening efforts to protect and safeguard the world’s cultural and natural heritage.’<sup>22</sup> This was a mainstreaming of the importance of urban development and heritage development all in one fell swoop.

### **The Role of Rangoon the City**

And so the city of Yangon (formerly known as Rangoon) steps into the world in which heritage is increasingly framed as a development tool and not an impediment. Much of the funding for development through heritage is reliant upon international and domestic tourism. The use of the term ‘uniqueness’ in the World Bank report is telling. In an “ever-tightening global economy, [cities] find themselves needing to exploit their natural resources and vernacular built heritage to attract international investors.”<sup>23</sup> In order to stand out in a dense field of competition for tourist dollars, cities must promote what makes them special and unlike the others. And in this competition tourism is seen as an almost faultless industry, as exemplified by comments made

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<sup>22</sup> UN Sustainable Development Goals <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdgs> (accessed May 17<sup>th</sup>, 2017)

<sup>23</sup> Alsayyad, 4

by President of the Union of Myanmar, U Thein Sein in 2011 when he made a gave a speech to the UN's World Tourism Organization, inaugurating Myanmar's return to the UN's tourism body:

“Tourism is a major sector of the economy not only for Myanmar but also for all countries around the world. It brings benefits to the country, boosts its economy and creates employment opportunities...tourism should be considered a ‘smokeless industry’ and one that ‘boosts growth, creates job opportunities, conserve the environment and helps and maintain traditional arts and crafts.”<sup>24</sup>

My desire to use Yangon as the basis for examining heritage is framed both by this shift in development thinking, and therefore Yangon's place in time but also by the city's place in geography, the uniqueness of its urban heritage form and its centrality to the history of the Nation of Myanmar.

As mentioned above Yangon finds itself as a remnant, having not already torn down its historic core as its regional sister-cities have done.<sup>25</sup> More to the point Yangon has a historic district that is unusual for the globe, let alone the region as it has one of, if not *the* largest concentration of Victorian and Edwardian buildings in the world.<sup>26</sup> This uniqueness in some ways explains outside interest in the city. The importance of Yangon extends locally.

During Colonial era Rangoon served as the capital. *The colonial urban planners* set out to create a formal grid befitting a commercial capital these plans were ‘more representative of a general British philosophy of colonial urbanism than they are observations drawn from

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<sup>24</sup> Chang, T.c., Simon Milne, Dale Fallon, and Corinne Pohlmann. "Urban heritage tourism: The Global-Local Nexus." P.35

<sup>25</sup> See J. Henderson's work, particularly "Conserving Heritage in South East Asia: Cases from Malaysia, Singapore and the Philippines.'

<sup>26</sup> Peleggi, Maurizio. "Consuming colonial nostalgia: The Monumentalisation of Historic Hotels in Urban South-East Asia." P.257

Rangoon's own history.<sup>27</sup> Once the city as built it continued its role as one of the tools of colonialism and urban policy was used to separate people. The Rangoon Development Trust, the colonial-era urban policy arm of the colonial government 'helped inflame racial tensions between Indians and non-Indians in the lead up to riots that characterize 1930s Burma.'<sup>28</sup>

Yangon was the colonial capital of British Burma and continued to be the major commercial, and until 2005 when the military government constructed Naypyidaw, the governmental capital of post-colonial Myanmar. The city has a long political history as a site of anticolonial movements, assassinations of leaders, political freedom protests and house arrests<sup>29</sup>. It has long been a city of multiple ethnicities, both from within and without Myanmar. It is not surprising that Yangon has been characterized as 'central to the construction of ethnic citizenships in Burma.'<sup>30</sup> Jayde Lin Roberts argues that it was and continues to be in the Yangon's urban form that Burmese of Chinese descent could 'become part of the city' as 'the city has become part of them.'<sup>31</sup> Michael Sugarman goes beyond a single ethnic group to argue that Yangon is 'the centre of colonial-era contestations over modernity and gendered citizenship.'<sup>32</sup> Yangon is therefore a place of multiple histories, a place of colonial construction

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<sup>27</sup> Maxim, Sarah Heminway. "The resemblance in external appearance: the colonial project in Kuala Lumpur and Rangoon." P.43

<sup>28</sup> Sugarman, Michael. "Building Burma: Constructing Rangoon's Urban Influence on Citizenship and Nationhood." P.462

<sup>29</sup> Chang, T.c., Simon Milne, Dale Fallon, and Corinne Pohlmann. "Urban heritage tourism: The Global-Local Nexus." P.36

<sup>30</sup> Sugarman, Michael. "Building Burma: Constructing Rangoon's Urban Influence on Citizenship and Nationhood." P.461

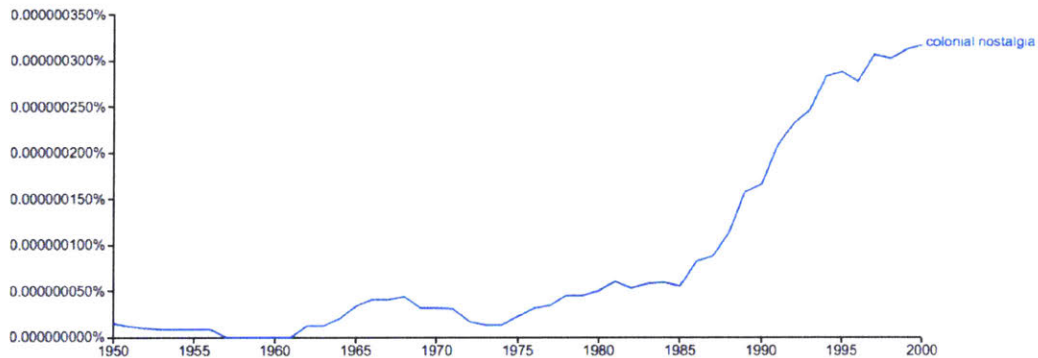
<sup>31</sup> Roberts, Jayde Lin. Mapping Chinese Rangoon: Place and Nation Among the Sino-Burmese,p.6-8

<sup>32</sup> Sugarman, Michael. "Building Burma: Constructing Rangoon's Urban Influence on Citizenship and Nationhood.", p.461

and formation but also at the same time central to the cosmopolitan identities of its Indian, Chinese, Burmese, and so on residents.

Thus the urban environment was central to the colonial project, to movements to end colonialism and to the ongoing identity-formation of ethnic and national citizenship when it was called Rangoon and continues in the city called Yangon.

### Colonial Nostalgia



Colonial nostalgia began being discussed in earnest in 1985, as indicated by the Google Ngram image above (accessed May 20<sup>th</sup>, 2017), though it was first used in books Google has documented before the end of the colonial era in the 1950s through 1970s. From the mid-1980s, however, after the Falklands War and as economic recessions beset both the US and the UK the term started to appear particularly around the idea of tourism in developing countries.

The term nostalgia was first used in 1688 as a medical diagnosis to describe the mental state of mercenaries fighting far from home, which explains the combination of the two Greek words that make up nostalgia: *nostos* (to return home) and *algia* (a painful condition).<sup>33</sup> The term

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<sup>33</sup> Davis in Olick, Jeffery K., Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi, and Daniel Levy. "Memory, Justice, and the Contemporary Epoch." P.450

soon lost its pathological meaning and became instead of a sickness about place, a sickness and yearning for a time, a definition to exists today.<sup>34</sup> This yearning from a time gone by is seen by scholars of memory as deeply rooted in present conditions in time:

“[M]ore than ‘mere past’ is involved. It is past imbued with special qualities, which, moreover, acquired its significance from the particular way we juxtapose it to certain features in our present lives” (Davis, 448)

Nostalgia is anchored in what is happening today and how we compare it to what we imagine or remember happened in the past. It is not surprising given the political reactionary embedded in nostalgia that it is the term used to discuss a yearning for past times from Raj nostalgia<sup>35</sup>, imperial nostalgia.<sup>36</sup> The particular form of nostalgia that is at the heart of this essay is colonial nostalgia which is used by William Bissel who describes the yearning for the colonial past he has found in urban Zanzibar. Bissel speaks of colonial nostalgia which ‘is shaped by specific cultural concerns and struggles...[and] rather than evoking commonality and continuity, it works as a mode of social memory by emphasizing distance and disjuncture.’<sup>37</sup>

Colonial nostalgia is more and more often discussed when looking at how that past is remembered in tourist sites, hotels and landscapes. When discussing a site in Australia Kate Gregory notes that this colonial nostalgia is not inert or harmless but can easily blur from the yearning for a time, to a yearning for an ideology, she speaks of the ‘fatal attractions of colonial

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<sup>34</sup> Olick, Jeffery K., Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi, and Daniel Levy. "Memory, Justice, and the Contemporary Epoch." P.400

<sup>35</sup> Greet, Annie, Syd Harrex, and Susan Hosking, eds. *Raj Nostalgia: Some Literary and Critical Implications*

<sup>36</sup> Ballinger, Pamela. "Imperial Nostalgia: Mythologizing Habsburg Trieste."

<sup>37</sup> Bissell, William Cunningham. "Engaging colonial nostalgia." p.216

nostalgia [that] are inscribed within contemporary cultures of travel.<sup>38</sup> She continues, 'what makes those histories so nostalgic—and so dangerous—is the *seductiveness* of colonial power.'<sup>39</sup>

Some of the most explicit sites of colonial nostalgia have been the grand old colonial hotels which after years of neglect in Southeast Asia are witnessing the successful economics of uniqueness advanced by the world bank as they are renovated and claim primacy in urban hotel markets. District from preservation that seeks to faithfully recreate these hotels 'aim to achieve an antiquarian effect while, in fact upgrading their facilities.'<sup>40</sup> Instead there is a preservation of individual colonial buildings and a large colonial urban fabric into, in the case of Singapore:

{A} mere urban scenography for the consumption practices of tourists and affluent professionals, both locals and expatriates. This newly invented 'historic' cityscape is the cornerstone of the marketing of Singapore by [the Singapore Tourism Board] as 'New Asia'—a vibrant, multicultural, cosmopolitan city state where tradition and modernity mingle harmoniously.<sup>41</sup>

These scenographies are exemplified in Singapore's Raffles Hotel (which was created by the same Sarkie Brothers who built Yangon's Strand Hotel), a grand old colonial hotel whose wild economic success has lead its parent copy to invest in preservation of grand old hotels in Cambodia and in other nostalgias in Hamburg, Germany, Beverly Hills, US and London, UK.<sup>42</sup>

This success is not built on the accuracy of the colonial image they present. There is no specificity to the recreation and as there was not much documentary evidence to pull from for

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<sup>38</sup> Gregory, Kate, and Paterson, Alistair. "Commemorating the Colonial Pilbara: Beyond Memorials into Difficult History. P.113

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, 112 (her emphasis)

<sup>40</sup> Peleggi, Maurizio. "Consuming colonial nostalgia: The Monumentalisation of Historic Hotels in Urban South-East Asia." P.256

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, p.257

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, p.257

accuracy, the architects of the Strand renovation fell back on creation 'typical features of a colonial grand hotel'<sup>43</sup> using what Maurizio Peleggi calls 'architectural enhancements,' architectural or interior design details that while they may not have existed or been in wide use during the colonial era, give the appearance that they could have (think for example of an electric ceiling fan which is covered in rattan), all these details create a 'colonial ambiance.'<sup>44</sup>

Many of the buildings being saved are the most epic which were, at least in part, built to convey a message of strength of the colonial ideology. In just such a grand hotel in Fiji which during the colonial era:

'[E]pitomised the sight of colonial power and leisure; exclusive to the colony's administrators, traders, eminent visitors, tourists and the small number of Fijian chiefs, local intelligentsia and senior servants of the colonial administration.'<sup>45</sup>

The Grand Old Dame of Suva, as the hotel is called, 'is set to become a special favourite of the 'Raffles Set', those who love the atmosphere of the old colonial haunts of Empire—Raffles in Singapore, the Galle Face in Colombo'<sup>46</sup> and we could well add the Strand of Yangon.

Hotels such as this one were places that gained its allure through exclusivity, and a particular colonial exclusivity and scholars point to a concern that with sinking resources into giving the physical form, into the building, that there may be at the same time a new life given to the ideologies and divisions of the colonial time as The Grand Old Dame revitalization may be seen as a 'symbolic of a prolongation of a class system that places Europeans and local elites at

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<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, p.258

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, p.261

<sup>45</sup> Cheer, Joseph M., and Keir J. Reeves. "Colonial heritage and tourism: ethnic landscape perspectives.", p.154-155

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*. p.156 (quoting Davis)

the apex.<sup>47</sup> The plans of revitalization often do not include attempts at democratization of the space, the luxury hotel of lore will again be a luxury hotel, or a boutique or apartments and the people who will be filling them will likely echo the administrators (of development agencies or corporations), traders, eminent visitors, tourists (many of them from Europe or America), the elite of Myanmar private and governmental sectors. Cheers and Reeves note that 'reminiscences of the 'good old days' through colonial heritage is centred on memories that were the province of the 'inner circle' of the colonial regime.'<sup>48</sup> This nostalgia for colonialism may extend beyond the 'architectural enhancements' with the allure of the colonial ambiance in part built on repetition and reinforcement of colonial exclusivity. While speaking of the Bahamas Catherine Palmer notes 'colonialism was concerned with power, domination, and control and with the superiority of one group over another through the perpetuation of inequality.'<sup>49</sup>

Scholars from Fiji to the Bahamas both note the use of colonial nostalgia in tourism but also warn that it should not be seen as entirely benign. Tourism built on this form of nostalgia, therefore calls into questions that claims by President U Thein Sein that it is a 'smokeless industry.' For the 'colonial ambiance' sold most explicitly in grand old hotels, but also to be found in restaurants, bars and real estate developments, is not just a slight untruth, it's a powerful retelling that can pull people apart and there may be a reason we speak of 'revival'

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<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, 155

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 158

<sup>49</sup> Palmer, Catherine A. "Tourism and colonialism: The experience of the Bahamas." P.808

and 'revitalization' both words which are about giving new life. There is a real danger in preserving and breathing new life into ideologies like colonialism.

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