

An International Conference to explore approaches to the preservation of urban built heritage, with a focus on Melbourne

Melbourne Brain Centre | Kenneth Myer Building | University of Melbourne

<http://artinstitute.unimelb.edu.au> | aiah-info@unimelb.edu.au | +61 3 8344 8957

Rupert Mann

Yangon Heritage Trust

Yangon: Urban Heritage and a City in Flux

Myanmar is emerging from a prolonged period of military dictatorship. Having lurched from one manifestation of military rule to another over 60 years, the country is now experiencing a tentative period of political, economic and social reform. As the former capital and current economic centre, Yangon is at the core of these changes. And at the core of a campaign to ensure Yangon conserves what makes it unique is the Yangon Heritage Trust (YHT).

Yangon's unique qualities, unlike cities with an impressive natural setting, derive from its built form and the people who inhabit it. This form is overwhelmingly characterised by late 19th and early to mid 20th century architecture, while the local communities and their practices, traditions and economies are vibrant and diverse.

For YHT, this heritage significance is a huge part of what makes Yangon valuable, unique, regionally competitive, economically profitable, attractive and, of course, liveable. Indeed YHT's vision is for Yangon to be one of Asia's most liveable cities by 2030 through the proper management of its urban heritage. YHT does not oppose change, but rather advocates for planning that requires new buildings to fit harmoniously into the heritage character of the city. Indeed, existing heritage places should be treated respectfully and conserved as a valuable asset. In the interests of public accountability, urban heritage and broader planning frameworks should be governed by clear, fair and transparent processes and guidelines. With these proposals in mind, there is the potential for Yangon to be a sustainable and green city where local residents have free and easy access to open recreational space. As part of this plan, the waterfront should be reconnected to the city centre and green public open space provided along the former dock areas. An integrated public transport system should also be constructed, so as to discourage car usage while encouraging pedestrian access to the historic downtown area. Taken together, these proposals will support the economic strength and cultural diversity of the city.

In building support for this vision, YHT is not appealing to a nostalgic view of the past. For many Burmese people, Yangon's colonial urban heritage represents somebody else's past, the remnants of a long departed foreign empire. So in a city where most people do not feel a direct sense of cultural ownership of much of the built heritage they inhabit, a vision for a liveable, profitable and regionally competitive city is something of direct and real relevance.

Below is an example of how YHT goes about advancing its vision, in this case advocating that the historic downtown should fall under a 4-6 storey height control and high-rise be allowed in surrounding areas. The arguments mounted were not primarily about 'heritage' as it would typically be seen by the broader community or by government officials in Myanmar.

The main benefit of a low height control is that it controls density. Yangon's downtown grid consists of narrow streets and narrow blocks. Ensuring high-rise does not occur in the downtown area will limit unmanageable increases in density and so avoid the associated problems of congestion and scarcity.

Discouraging high-rise in these established and economically diverse communities will also allow existing economies to continue. In general new condominiums and high-rise do not allow street vendors to operate outside their frontages. They also do not usually provide space for traditional economies within the premises.

High-rise removes people's connection to the street. Yangon's small-scale heritage buildings with generous balconies allow people to see and hear what is going on at street level. The street is watched and heard at all times. Children can be watched by parents; visitors and activities can be observed. Experiences of many cities have shown that high-rise towers dominate and overwhelm people while separating them from the street.

Low height restrictions remove demolition pressures from low-rise properties. This will allow Yangon's unique urban heritage to continue to exist, in turn giving the city an opportunity to create a tourism industry around that heritage. This would generate an economy, potentially worth billions of dollars in the future.

Limiting density in the downtown grid will allow the municipal authority, Yangon City Development Committee (YCDC), to provide adequate electricity, water and other utility services such as sewerage and rubbish collection. This will have major impacts on future liveability and the regional competitiveness of Yangon in South East Asia.

Traffic congestion is already one of the major issues facing Yangon and its liveability. Ensuring high-rise is not allowed in the narrowly gridded historic downtown will limit traffic congestion. The historic downtown cannot absorb any further increase in traffic flow. This in turn will limit noise and air pollution from cars and have positive impacts on people's health, quality of life and productivity.

Maintaining the downtown as a historic low-rise area will allow fresh air and sunlight to penetrate to street level having a positive impact on health and liveability.

This model makes the cultural and economic core of Yangon a shared and mutually beneficial asset. For inhabitants of surrounding towers, the downtown would become a major attraction, adding to liveability through access to restaurants, shops, green public spaces, cultural diversity and interest. Simultaneously, the economies of the historic downtown would benefit from the increased patronage of the tower inhabitants.

As one of the world's great heritage cities possessing a unique asset worth billions of dollars in the future, what happens in Yangon over the next 10 years is key to Myanmar's future. Urbanisation is a major global trend and Myanmar's urban population is expected to double by 2030. If Yangon can conserve and enhance what makes it unique—its urban cultural heritage—then it positions itself as something almost unheard of in South East Asia: a major modern city that sustains substantial economic activity while providing good standards of liveability, all without destroying its urban heritage.