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Myanmar pushes to save colonial buildings

By Gwen Robinson in Yangon



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Myanmar has imposed a temporary ban on the demolition of buildings over 50 years old in Yangon, in a push to preserve what historians regard as one of Asia's most distinctive colonial-era cityscapes.

“We want to avoid the mistakes other Asian cities have made,” Soe Thein, Myanmar's industry minister and chairman of its investment commission, told the Financial Times.

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Under the umbrella of the Yangon Heritage Trust, a non-governmental organisation set up by historian [Thant Myint-U](#), architects and historians have begun work with the government on a conservation plan.

“We hope this will be good for tourism and also good for the people of Yangon,” said Soe Thein.

A century ago, Yangon was one of Asia's great trading centres and home to a diverse population. Its colourful history lies at the city's heart, where ancient Buddhist pagodas sit alongside churches and cathedrals, Sunni and Shia mosques, Hindu and Parsee temples, and even a Jewish synagogue.

Yangon is home to hundreds of old Victorian and Edwardian-era buildings, including the former premises of Lloyds and HSBC banks, and the all-teak Pegu Club where Rudyard Kipling once stayed.

The moratorium highlights the sense of urgency in the former capital as it struggles with a surge in tourists and soaring demand for residential and office space. Myanmar is attracting intense interest from foreign investors as it [rapidly opens up after decades of military rule](#) and diplomatic isolation.

Soe Thein, who is working with the Yangon regional government on development planning, said it was important to “make Yangon a more modern city, but we also need to embrace its heritage, including its old buildings”. He said the ban would remain until a conservation strategy was drawn up.

The city has a diverse ethnic mix, but its 19th century population of about 100,000 has swelled to about 6m people in greater Yangon. Thant Myint-U warned that time was running out for Yangon, which suffers from

creaking infrastructure, electricity shortages, traffic congestion and pollution.

While the grander edifices are protected, hundreds of dilapidated century-old residential buildings – many housing the city’s poorest families – are not. More than half of these buildings have been demolished over the past 20 years to make way for poorly designed apartment blocks. As the pace of commercial development accelerates, he added, the need to act had become critical.

The Yangon Heritage Trust has already drawn support from donor governments, NGOs and wealthy individuals, both from Myanmar and other countries. Thant Myint-U said that while the project would ultimately be vast and cost billions of dollars, the idea was a “simple one – to protect as many of Yangon’s 19th and early 20th century buildings as possible, as part of a broader urban plan”.

One exemplary, private-sector restoration project in Yangon is the Strand Hotel – a Victorian-era building that welcomed George Orwell during his time in the country – on the bank of the Yangon river, which has been transformed from a faded, budget hostel to an elegant luxury hotel.

Under the trust’s proposals, small zones within the city centre would be designated as heritage areas. Private investors would be approached to help restore the grander buildings and convert them into hotels, offices and other commercial properties. He said the goal was to maintain the city’s multicultural environment, “rather than creating a sanitised tourist or commercial zone”.

“The critical thing is that this isn’t an effort led by government, business, or civil society, but a mix of all three, and that we work towards a plan that is realistic, good for the economy and good for Yangon people,” said Thant Myint-U.

Sarah Rooney, author of a forthcoming book on Yangon’s historic architecture, said the city was “at a crucial crossroads”.

“Yangon’s colonial-era buildings are a vital link between its past and future. They’ve lived through natural disasters as well as numerous changes of ownership and systems of government . . . the biggest threat is now neglect – or the development imperative,” she said.

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