Rangoon is the largest city in Burma and dates back more than 1000 years to the Mon Dynasty. It has evolved into a large metropolis that has experienced substantial demographic, economic, and environmental transition. As the largest Burmese settlement in terms of population and extent, and as the nation’s chief port and the center of its commercial and tourism sectors, it has been the site of massive urban growth and environmental change, reflecting the ideological, strategic, and economic goals of Burma’s national government. The population has risen to about 5 million people, instigating considerable suburban sprawl as well as significant transformation of the colonial core. With a significant percentage of the total urban population of Burma now residing in Rangoon, the importance of the city to the country should not be underestimated even though it is no longer the national capital and its infrastructure lags behind that of other major metropolises in South East Asia.

Introduction

Burma\(^1\) is a country that is habitually misconstrued. It has a rich history that stretches back over thousands of years yet its past is barely recognized outside of South East Asia. Likewise the significance of Burma’s position on the peninsula formerly known as Indo-China (Aung, 1967), its proximity to the Andaman Sea and Bay of Bengal, and its borders with Bangladesh, China, India, Laos and Thailand are not widely appreciated (Fig. 1). Consequently what common knowledge people hold of Burma is limited in nature. This image neglects, for instance, the influence that various foreign peoples and cultures have had (Maninn, 1955), at one time or another, upon Burmese society, and, significantly, it also disregards Burma’s historic role as one of the leading kingdoms in the history of South East Asia (Desai, 1954). Generically speaking the familiarity people have with Burma centers upon four more modern-day factors: its former status as a British colony; the country’s post-independence political identity which, it must be said, is allied to the military government that has been in power since 1962; the government’s isolation from the global political community; and the government’s reputation for violating its citizens’ human rights. Yet, in contrast to this imagery, present-day Burma is a place experiencing rapid transformation (History, 2012). Political reform has, by way of example, recently occurred. A new constitution was passed in 2008, and in November 2010 the first general election for 20 years was held. At the same time, observed The Economist (2012c) in July 2012, large-scale investment in infrastructure is also taking place, and lofty ambitions for economic development are being publically declared by the nation’s political leader, Thein Sein.

At the same time, Rangoon, Burma’s largest settlement, has experienced urban development on an unprecedented scale. Hitherto greenfield sites surrounding the city have been built upon, and buildings at the urban core, dating from the colonial era, have been razed. Foreign investment in Burma, particularly from China,\(^2\) is on the rise, and this too has affected Rangoon’s urban character. Demand for office space has grown, and construction taking place in the city center is of an ever-enlarging vertical scale. Industrial estates at the urban fringe have been formed. Accordingly Burma’s largest city must be recognized as being in the midst of a process of environmental alteration, a reshaping that reflects the nation’s push for modernity and development (In Myanmar, 2011).

In attempting to understand Rangoon, its evolution, and present-day character one would be hard pressed to find another example of a large-sized city that is on the one hand of such domestic significance, yet on the other hand, has been so understudied. The apparent lack of interest in Rangoon, at least in scholarly terms, is palpable by the handful of books and papers published on the city’s environment during the past few decades (e.g. Kraas, Gaese, & Kyi, 2006). Yet this scenario should not be read as an indicator of the city’s lack of value either to the Burmese nation or to South East Asia. Rather, it is the consequence of the difficulties that academics have in obtaining official data on local society. Indeed, any examination of Rangoon’s history as well as the city’s evolution in the present day is constrained by the research which has been carried out. This paper aims to address these gaps in knowledge by presenting a systematically researched analysis of the city’s changing characteristics, thereby providing a brief overview of the city, its history, and its present day environment.
its contemporary state of being will expose the valuable role the city has played during the past centuries to Leonard (1985), and is still playing in shaping Burmese society today.

Located on the east of the Irrawaddy Delta, Rangoon's site has played a critical role in its development. The strategic significance of the settlement's riverside location was responsible not only for its founding but over the course of time its growth, and armed conflict: various Burmese dynasties aside from British colonial authorities in the 1800s sought to obtain control of the community and its hinterland (Harvey, 1946), in so doing granting themselves uninhibited access south to the Andaman Sea, and north to central and Upper Burma where extensive natural resources are still found. Notwithstanding the importance of its past, Rangoon nowadays is one of the largest urban places in South East Asia. It is a dynamic metropolis and, as previously mentioned, it is also one undergoing major alterations in its economic, social, and built fabric (Myanmar’s Colonial Treasures Threatened, 2010). Hence in this profile, Rangoon’s variegated urban landscapes will be presented with some explanation put forward in relation to the historic and contemporary forces that have shaped the evolution of the settlement.

**Background**

With a territory of more than 260,000 square miles Burma occupies the second largest land mass of all countries in South East Asia. With a population that has grown from 28.9 million people in 1973 to about 60 million people in 2009 (see Table 1), Burma has created for itself a sizeable workforce that can, in theory, either exploit its copious supply of natural resources or contribute to the domestic manufacturing and tertiary industrial bases. Owing to this demography one might expect that Burma has in recent decades sustained social and economic advancement to Dapice (2003); Some statistical data undeniably demonstrate that steps forward have occurred (Skidmore, 2005). For example, Burma’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) grew, according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) from $2.79 billion in 1990 to $35.22 billion in 2010. During this period economic growth reached as high as 7% per annum, and even in 2009, a year of global economic depression, Burma’s economy grew at a robust 5.2%. What’s more, during the same time frame, infant mortality levels dropped from 83.6 to 53.8 per 1000 births, and the vast majority of children were for the first time immunized against pediatric disease. Yet, on the flipside, despite some improvement within Burmese society, social and economic predicaments such as poverty, poor housing, low levels of access to secondary education, and comparatively low average life expectancies (62.1 years in 2009, a level barely higher than in 1980), have persisted (see Dahiya, in press). At the same time, the cost of staples such as rice and fuel have increased manifold, the country has become reliant upon foreign aid at times of economic crisis (e.g. the late 1980s) and natural disaster (e.g. Cyclone Nargis, in 2008), and by as late as 2003 9 out of the 33 wards that comprised Rangoon had no piped water. Consequently, it has been argued that Burma’s economic growth during the past few decades has had a limited effect on the population as a whole.

**Table 1**

The population size of Burma, 1872–2010.  
*Source:* For population data of the years 1872–1983 statistics were derived from censuses taken by the British colonial administration and national government of Burma. Data for the years of 1990, 2000, and 2010 are based on population projections for Myanmar by the International Monetary Fund.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total population (in millions)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1872</td>
<td>2.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1881</td>
<td>3.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1891</td>
<td>7.72</td>
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<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>10.49</td>
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<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>12.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>13.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>14.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>16.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td>28.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td>35.44</td>
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<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>40.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>50.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>61.18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 1. A map of Burma (Myanmar).
30% of the nation’s total population currently lives below the poverty line, and food insecurity has become manifest in the country’s demographic trends: people now marry at a later age, and in accord with this the fertility rate has fallen from 5.53 in 1975 to 2.28 in 2009. In 2000 almost 24,900 acres in Nyaung Hnapin, Hlegu and Hmawbi Townships was turned over to agricultural land so as to stabilize the cost of vegetables, rice, and meat in Rangoon.

In 2009 the Asian Development Bank (ADB) observed that the Burmese economy was dominated, just as it has historically been, by low-money earning agrarian activities, namely farming, fisheries, and forestry. Although the national government at that time proclaimed that its primary economic responsibility was to manage the “proper evolution” of Burma’s market-oriented economy it is apparent from the nature of public policy that this pursuit will be derived through very particular means: expansion of the agricultural sector; centralized control of banking; and foreign investment. With Burma’s agricultural industry presently accounting for more than 45% of the national economy and 70% of the national workforce, and with the average annual salary for farmers at just $337 per annum (a figure much lower than Thailand ($2063 per annum), and Malaysia ($12,260 a year), the Burmese government has thus embarked on a strategy for national development based for the most part upon increasing the yields of the 29.35 million acres of farmland in the country. However this policy, in particular with its focus upon the increased production of rice, is not segregated from other economic courses of action, e.g. curbing inflation (7.9% in 2009), solidifying the value of Burmese currency (the Kyat), reducing total foreign debt ($7 billion in 2011), expanding the national infrastructure (Fig. 2), and, as already touched upon, attracting “productive investment” from overseas. Designed to encourage an “efficient expansion of the economy and modest personal habits”, rationalized as continuing the traditional Burmese lifestyle, by the early-1980s economic growth was achieved: GDP was growing at 6.5% per annum which was far outstripping population growth at that time (2.02% in 1983). To maintain this economic momentum, and to deal with Rangoon’s socio-environmental and economic problems—namely the growth of squatter areas, the vast amount of low standard housing in the city, and its stagnating economy—private enterprise was permitted and the physical development of the settlement contemplated.

Utilizing urban planning as a tool for national development the SLORC suggested the creation of new towns, dramatically increasing the city’s sprawl in the process (see Table 2). Consequently, in the 1990s Rangoon’s built environment covered more than 220 square miles, an almost threefold increase on what it was in the mid-1970s.

Table 2
The evolving spatial extent of Rangoon. Source: Pearn (1939) and Yin May (1999).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Urban sprawl (in square miles)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1851</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1876</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>30.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1953</td>
<td>47.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td>85.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td>133.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>223.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>231.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 2. Infrastructure development: the widening of Strand Road in Rangoon to provide better access to the port. Source: Ian Morley.
Historical outline: the emergence of modern Rangoon

Known prior to the mid-1700s as Dagon, Rangoon owes its founding during the Mon Dynasty in the mid-eleventh century, and its importance in subsequent years, to two factors: the rivers that flow through it and the Shwe Dagon Pagoda. Notwithstanding the number of boats still transporting goods and people along the Hlaing, Yangon, and Bago Rivers, and the omnipresence of lofty pagodas in the city, Rangoon today must be recognized for being a sizeable modern city of considerable domestic and international significance.

With an urban sprawl three times larger than Hanoi (Gough & Tran, 2009), two and a half times larger than Kuala Lumpur (Tan, in press), and at about the same size as Bangkok (Sintusingha & Mirgholami, in press), Rangoon covers one of the largest spatial extents of all cities in South East Asia. Containing a significant percentage of Burma’s total urban population, Rangoon is a dense primate city4 dominating the next largest settlements in Burma: Mandalay (population circa 1.2 million), and Naypyidaw (population about 1 million). Even though in July 2006 the city lost its national capital title to Naypyidaw, a new settlement situated more than 300 km north of Rangoon, the value of the latter to the Burmese is not to be economically, culturally, or socially underestimated. What is more, its evolution and present-day condition (unlike that of Naypyidaw, which owes its founding and development solely to political decisions), has been shaped by a broad range of contexts.

Each process has left an imprint of some kind upon the city’s physical landscape, and nowhere in Rangoon is this association between the built environment and the broad frameworks existent in Burmese society more apparent than in the downtown district, an area of the city that was developed after the arrival of British colonizers. The onset of British rule in 1824 resulted in the subsequent redevelopment and rapid expansion of Rangoon (Table 3) Huff (2012). Today the architectural and spatial imprint of British rule persists, and downtown Rangoon has the largest number of colonial buildings in any South East Asian settlement. To be succinct, Rangoon has an unparalleled urban core.

The growth of Rangoon, as demonstrated by the rise of its population in the past, owes much to the British colonial attitude that urban development represented a higher level of civilization (Fraser, 1920). However, to label Rangoon’s growth as simply the outcome of colonization downplays the history of Burma before and after British rule, i.e. before 1824 and post-1948. To illustrate this point, in 1755 a major turning point in its evolution was reached when King Alaungpaya, ruler of what is today known as Lower Burma, captured the small fishing village of Dagon and modified it to become a port. Changing the name of the settlement from Dagon to Rangoon, a name meaning “end of opposition”, the ruler instructed that wharves should be created along the Yangon River in proximity to what is today Pansodan Jetty, and initiated what might be considered the start of modern Rangoon. To consolidate the community’s existence, new water wells were dug and a defensive wall erected. Despite being just one eighth of a square mile in extent, the protective wooden wall, said to be 20 feet high in places, gave a sense of security and permanence not previously witnessed. This social stability led to five other socio-environmental features becoming apparent by the end of the 1700s: a marked rise in the size of the local population, estimated at 30,000 people by the century’s end; the emergence of Rangoon as a high density living environment; bamboo and wooden buildings being replaced by wooden ones; the materialization of suburbs beyond the settlement’s walls (e.g. for the Chinese community employed at the wharves), and a widening ethnic diversity within the settlement; and a growth in the size and status of the port so that by the end of the eighteenth century Rangoon had acquired a reputation for exporting timber and ship building. To underscore this point, from 1786 to 1824 111 boats weighing 35,000 tonnes were built in Rangoon, and whilst most of these ships were constructed for the British East India Company, orders also came from places such as Muscat. Such was Rangoon’s shipbuilding reputation circa the early-1800s that constellation was expressed within British India of its potential to become a supplier of boats to a company or country wishing to rival the East India Company’s maritime power.

If the period from 1755 to the early-1800s can be characterized as an era of environmental and demographic advancement for Rangoon, then the war of 1824 between Burma and the British must be viewed as providing another evolutionary phase. Allowing the British to obtain control of Lower Burma the 1824 conflict absorbed Rangoon into British India, and as the capital city of Britain’s new colony, migrants from the countryside and also from India were drawn to the settlement to work in the port and the nearby paddy fields, and in so doing so they rapidly increased the population. Yet in social and environmental terms the instigation of British influence did not bring any immediate change to life in Rangoon, in part due the British permitting authority within the settlement to remain in the hands of King Tharrawaddy. Rangoon’s reputation for high-density living conditions and associated problems such as disease therefore persisted. Hence by the 1830s the settlement was described by British visitors as being “wretched” and “intolerable” (Pears, 1939, p. 146). It was not until 1852, i.e. just 1 year prior to the wholesale rebuilding of Paris by Georges Haussmann, that the British directly intervened to raise its environmental condition.

After the Anglo-Burma War of 1852, when the settlement was all but flattened, the British replanned Rangoon so as to meet “modern requirements” and to avoid the environmental defects that had troubled it in the past, especially flooding. On the advice of Dr. William Montgomerie, who had served as Secretary to the

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3 In 2004 Burma contained 361 urban places. 116 of these settlements were defined as “small towns” i.e. a population of less than 10,000 people. 183 places were characterized as “medium towns” with populations of 10,000–50,000 people respectively. 35 “larger towns” exist, each with 50,000–100,000 people within. Only 27 urban places had populations of more than 100,000 people. In these 361 urban communities approximately 25% of the national population resided.

4 In 2005 Rangoon’s urban density was 635 people per square kilometer. In comparison Mandalay’s urban density was 226 persons per kilometer square.

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Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Population (in 1000s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1826</td>
<td>8.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1856</td>
<td>46.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1881</td>
<td>134.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1891</td>
<td>180.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>248.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>293.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>341.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>400.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1953</td>
<td>737.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td>2015.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td>2513.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>3097.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>4350.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>c. 5000 (estimate)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Fig. 3. A map of Rangoon in 1893 with the grid-plan of the colonial core clearly evident. Source: Online Burma/Myanmar Library (http://www.burmalibrary.org/index.php).

Fig. 4. A recent satellite image of Rangoon. Source: Google Earth.
Town Committee in Singapore, an entirely new city for 36,000 people was planned (Fig. 3) with its urban form guided by principles of health, convenience, and beauty.

Contemporary Rangoon: transformation and development

Rangoon is a place where economic, environmental, and social change is in the air. This transition, a drive to modernize the city, is evident at the urban core and in the suburbs. In physical terms, Rangoon (Fig. 4) broadly consists of four spatial parts—three of which were formed in the colonial era—all under the authority of the Yangon City Development Council (YCDC, formed in 1974). The first is the flat, high-density downtown district. The second consists of a low-density neighborhood north of downtown, an area of the city marked by three small hills as well as Shwe Dagon Pagoda, People’s Park, and Kan Daw Gyi Lake. The third section of Rangoon is located in proximity to Inya Lake, a body of water about ten kilometers from downtown, where Yangon University and houses for the wealthy of local society are sited. The final physical component is its outlying townships established after national independence.

The downtown quarter of Rangoon is a rectangular plot of land measuring 4.25 km in length by a kilometer in width (at its broadest). Arranged in accord with William Montgomerry’s plan of 1852, albeit with slight amendments by Lieutenant A. Fraser of the Bengal Engineers, the city core was put on land purposefully built-up to be one foot above the high-water mark of three waterways: to the west the Hlaing River; to the south the Yangon River; to the east Pazunduang Creek. To the north an artificial border was established by the central train station and rail lines laid down in the 1870s, and although buildings at that time existed north of the colonial core, e.g. about Shwe Dagon Pagoda, much land beyond the central area was swampy in nature which restricted where edifices were sited. Whilst much urban development has now occurred north of the colonial core, the railway tracks still exist, and so continue to act as a boundary between the city center and its outlying districts. The margin between the urban core and the rest of Rangoon has been exacerbated by the redevelopment of sections of the northern fringe of the downtown area in the past 10–15 years as a consequence of costly gated communities, high class hotels, and high-rise offices having replaced colonial era buildings. Correspondingly, part of the northern edge of the city center, Bogyoke Aung San Road, is now built up like a wall at the front of the urban core.

In spatial terms, downtown Rangoon consists of streets symmetrically arranged into a grid pattern. This spatial organization not only gives it a visual quality not seen elsewhere in the settlement but furthermore as the district houses the city’s public edifices it visibly and spatially defines itself as the administrative and economic heart of the city. These buildings have been the sites where citizens have demonstrated against the nation’s political elites at different times in the past, due to reasons of economic hardship or the desire for political reform; the district therefore holds great symbolism for people in Burma. It was, for instance, the site of Burmese revolutionary nationalist rallies against colonial rule in the 1920s and 1930s, and following independence it has become a locale where people have demonstrated against the junta (notably in 1988 and 2007). Thus, the streets of downtown (Fig. 5) are recognized throughout Burma as, to cite Donald Seekins (2005, p. 258), a landscape of resistance, and despite post-1988 endeavors by the nation’s elites to aggressively transform the CBD in line with their ideological and commercial objectives (and by this is meant enlarge the local economy and politicize the city center so that social control can be maintained), it remains an environment dense with symbolic meaning.

With reference again to the downtown urban plan, it is marked by four 160 feet-wide streets running parallel to each other in an east–west direction. Arranged at a distance of about 900 feet from each other, these thoroughfares are criss-crossed every 150 feet by 57 roadways oriented north–south. 43 of these roadways, i.e. 75% of the north–south facing streets, are 30 feet or 50 feet wide, and the remaining 14 thoroughfares (25% of the north–south streets), have extra breadth. In some instances these 14 wider north–south roads are 100 feet wide, and because they are located at uniform distance from each other they, in conjunction with the aforementioned wide east–west streets, etch into the city center square super-blocks that are 900 feet in length and breadth. Inside each block a distinctive road-width morphology is identifiable from west to east: 30 feet street, 30 feet, 50 feet, 30 feet, 30 feet.

At the southern fringe of the CBD the only wide east–west thoroughfare in the urban core not to have a symmetrical form can be found. Strand Road instead follows the rolling line of Yangon River, and was originally laid down with open space on its southern side, so that the nearby waterway, said in 19th century to be the city’s most valuable natural asset, could be incorporated into the city plan. With the development of the riverside jetties and docks after the 1850s, this open area has though been encroached upon. It now contains numerous industrial buildings, and no longer offers the grand vistas originally envisaged to and from the river when Rangoon was redeveloped circa 1852. However, Strand Road nonetheless make an impact on the eye. It has been developed as a Bund lined with grandiose public buildings that include the Customs House, Strand Hotel, and Central Post Office. As to why downtown is arranged with its roads facing north–south and east–west, one simple explanation can be put forward: an urban form oriented in this manner would provide shade on at least one side of the street during different times of the day, and in so doing it would grant protection from the hot Burmese climate, where summer temperatures regularly top 40 °C. Furthermore the width of streets was not chosen arbitrarily: it was purposefully selected in order to grant ventilation, safety from fire and, in the case of the widest streets, vistas to and from prominent colonial and pre-colonial edifices.

Punctuated by open spaces and grand, large-sized public buildings from the colonial age, e.g. the General Hospital, Scott Market (now known as Bogyoke Aung San Market), City Hall, High Court, and the enormous Secretariat’s Office (now the Minister’s Office), central Rangoon showcases itself in a manner that no other downtown in South East Asia can: as a living architectural museum, a city that has captured and largely retained its built heritage (Association of Myanmar Architects, 2012, pp. 11–12). Yet within this setting a vast number of buildings are in a state of decay, and this has resulted in signs (Fig. 7) being put up by the YCDC to indicate their closure. With heritage values in Rangoon dictated by the junta, residents and owners of buildings condemned by inspectors have no legal means to challenge the closure decision so thus have little choice but to relocate. Furthermore under YCDC Ordinance 9/99 any building found to be “deteriorating” can be demolished as soon as possible, and with the push to modernize Rangoon there is a deep-rooted fear that the government can rapidly redevelop sites at nodes in the city so as to satisfy the need for “national development”. As a result of demolition work, and the subsequent redevelopment of sites, the visual nature of the CBD is changing, and Rangoon’s reputation for its built heritage is under severe threat.

The razing of colonial era buildings, a process seemingly gathering pace each year, is (as already touched upon) redefining the appearance of Rangoon, and in so doing diluting the aesthetic

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5 In administrative terms downtown comprises of six townships all under the jurisdiction of YCDC: Botataung, Kyauktada, Lammadaw, Latha, Pabedan, and Pazundaung.
appeal of the city. There are reasons why the attractiveness of Rangoon is being reduced. Principally it because the colonial buildings were composed in just one design style, the Classical, and had their primary architectural design features and detailing repeated from building to building. As such the colonial environment grants an impression of harmony: designed as a totality, a single environmental entity. Yet the aesthetic bond between the downtown buildings, i.e. the backbone of Rangoon's visual–environmental excellence, is now undermined as old buildings are replaced by modernist-influenced structures erected from concrete, steel, and glass, a style of enormous contrast to that of the older edifices. Accordingly, the aesthetic alliance that once so strongly existed within the city's core via symmetrically composed facades of buildings, their stucco detailing, common height, window shapes and floor level measurements, rusticated entrances, pilasters, and bal-

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6 Floor heights are purposefully high, between 3.6 and 4.2 m, so as to provide relief from the climate.

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Fig. 5. Top: A satellite image of the urban form of Rangoon’s urban core, and (bottom) an aerial view of Rangoon’s road layout in proximity to Sule Pagoda and Maha Bandoola Garden.
ustrades, has been eroded by the redevelopment of individual sites with modern edifices of wholly different appearance.

In addition, as numerous colonial buildings utilize vertical elements to catch the attention of the onlooker (see Figs. 6 and 8), the demolition of such buildings and their substitution with high-rise buildings has dramatically weakened this distinct visual component of the cityscape. Whilst, as mentioned before, Rangoon has the highest number of colonial buildings of any South East Asian city it also has the greatest number of vertical elements of any settlement in the region. So, as the practice of demolition gathers momentum, and the number of towers and domes decreases, the effect of those remaining vertical features are undermined. As a result of clearing old buildings, the vertical emphasis in the built environment has accordingly shifted. It no longer belongs to the towers and domes of the old buildings; instead, verticality is now being manifest in the form of soaring high-rise buildings:

Fig. 6. The view southwards along Sule Pagoda Road to Sule Pagoda. Source: Ian Morley.

Fig. 7. Condemned for demolition. The red sign informs passersby that the building is “dangerous”, and will be razed at some point in the future. Source: Ian Morley. (For interpretation of the references to color in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)
edifices that due to their enormous height overpower the architecture that for so long has defined downtown Rangoon. Ultimately, as a district initially developed as a hybrid of Classical architecture, religious edifices belonging to the various foreign communities that comprise local society, and with indigenous splendor in the form of pagodas, the cultural character of the city’s design—the cultural heritage of Rangoon—is being cast aside so as to satisfy development in the form of the shopping centers, pricey apartments, and offices for foreign companies keen to obtain a foothold in Burma’s economy.

Another emergent element in Rangoon’s environmental evolution during the past few years has been the degradation of its public buildings, particularly after 2005 when the decision was taken to move the national government to Naypyidaw. With public

Fig. 8. A view north along Pansodan Road where a high-rise building is under way. Source: Ian Morley.

Fig. 9. Repairs to a former government ministry building. Source: Ian Morley.
buildings consequently being left empty, many have fallen into a state of disrepair, and even though the YCDC established a building preservation list (with 189 buildings on it in 1997), a fear remains that many public edifices will be sold or will soon reach such a poor condition that it will be too costly to preserve and maintain them. Whilst efforts have been made to safeguard some public buildings, including former ministerial offices (Fig. 9), the context of small budgets for preservation work amid the desire for economic growth and to modernize Rangoon, has meant that architectural heritage is not high on the political agenda. Whilst the YCDC is the acknowledged caretaker of architecture in the city, its City Housing Estate Supervisory Committee has also, for instance in 2002, recommended that more high-rise construction should take place. With no independent body having political influence to protect built heritage, the junta has unleashed a process whereby historic Rangoon is being torn down in the name of "progress", an occurrence similar to what has happened elsewhere in South East Asia.

As a city developed with the vast majority of its downtown buildings having six or less storeys, Rangoon has evolved into a high density environment in which people, business, and industry all shared buildings. Accordingly a distinct vertical morphology became manifest: shops and workshops were located at the street level, offices were sited immediately above, and tenements (55 sq m) occupied the upper floor levels. Notably this vertical morphology, still evident in the city today, varied within the CBD. It altered in response to the different ethnic groups of the city, their occupations, and cultures. In the Chinese quarter, for instance, buildings were generally smaller in height, and longer. Their ground floors by and large consisted of small workshops or warehouses, e.g. for goldsmiths or for storing vegetables, that opened onto the street, with persons residing on the upper floor level. In this neighborhood the architectural style of the buildings is distinct as demonstrated by the tiled roofs and angled gables (Fig. 10). The ornamental colored stucco (chettyar) seen in other downtown locales is absent, and wooden shutters cover windows to provide protection from the heat, rather than the balconies noticeable throughout the rest of the city center. As the city has embarked upon redeveloping/modernizing itself such architectural idiosyncrasies are starting to vanish, and are being replaced by standardized high-rise building design. This has enormously impacted upon life in Rangoon. As already mentioned, the built heritage which made the city so visually rich is being lost. Secondly, the new city being constructed provides little reference to the local sense of place. Hence Rangoon, with its ever-growing volume of standardized architecture, has begun to offer an urban impression akin to those found within many cities in South East Asia. Thirdly, the distinguishing appearance and color of Rangoon is being replaced by concrete gray or reflective glass, and the morphological traditions based upon how different floor levels are utilized is likewise disappearing as an outcome of the modern fashion for single-use buildings. Yet officially this upgrading of the environment is enhancing the appearance of the city, improving quality of life, and the efficiency of the city.

Beyond downtown

Immediately north of the CBD lies a district dominated by the 98-m high Shwe Dagon Pagoda (built by the Mon during the sixth to tenth centuries), People’s Park, and Kan Daw Gyi Lake (formerly known as the Royal Lake). Built on one of the locality’s small hills,

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7 92 buildings on the list are of a religious nature, 39 are ‘social buildings’, e.g. markets, hospitals, etc., and 52 of an administrative/institutional use. Only three commercial, and three former residential buildings are on the list.

8 In 2010 five public buildings were selected by the Department of Human Settlement and Housing Development for basic renovation, these being the Minister’s Office, the former Immigration Office and Ministry of Hotels and Tourism, the Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise, and Myanmar Export and Import Corporation. Renovation took place from January to March 2011, and largely comprised of weather protection measures.
Shwe Dagon Pagoda (Fig. 11) has historically played a vital function. As a center of pilgrimage the pagoda, the most important site of Burmese Buddhism, has long denoted Rangoon's significance as a place of devotion and ritual. Housing a vast number of monasteries, the surrounding low-density leafy environment, partly used in the colonial era as a barracks and exercise ground for the British Army, has more of a park than an urban feel even though numerous important edifices are sited there: the National Archives Office; various government ministries and foreign embassies; National Museum; Martyr's Mausoleum and Museum to Fallen Heroes; National Theatre; Aung San Sports Stadium; hospitals; markets; burial grounds.

Owing to the vast open space of the People's Park, Zoological Gardens, and the 150-acre Kan Daw Gyi Lake, the area north of the city center has a very different ambience to the bustling CBD. Yet this part of the city in the past 20 years has been subject to much environmental transition as a consequence of the governmental objective to modernize Rangoon. International hotels have been constructed within this scenic area in order to help utilize the tourist potential of the country, high class housing estates built, and modern shopping complexes built. However construction has not only served an economic function or quality of life enhancement purpose. It also has had a political role because, similarly to downtown, the Shwe Dagon Pagoda area has a long-standing reputation for political activism as it has been used as a public space where resistance against the State has taken place (Tin & Wakeman, 2009). For example, during the colonial period Shwe Dagon Pagoda and nearby locales contained strike centers set up to confront British rule. In the years after independence (e.g. in 1988), the pro-democracy politician Aung San Suu Kyi used the slope of the pagoda’s hill to rally supporters, and in 2007 monks from the area were central to the Saffron Revolution, a series of demonstrations against the military government. Due to such outbreaks of civil unrest, government intervention in the area is now noticeable (Seekins, 2011). Public-sponsored ceremonies have been held in the pagoda, symbolically demonstrating how the religious center now belongs to the State, and adjacent land has been strategically redesigned in part to smash anti-government solidarity.

To illustrate this point, forced evictions have taken place in neighborhoods that were known to have aided demonstrators, and the vicinity of the Myeine Market, scene of the notorious June 21 protest in 1988, was leveled. Squatters living around pagodas and monasteries were forcefully relocated into new townships established at Rangoon's urban fringe.

Unlike the downtown, which contains just one public space of any substantial size, that being Maha Bandoola Garden (formerly Fitch Square), the area around Shwe Dagon Pagoda is copiously filled with open areas. Located between the pagoda and Pyithu Hluttaw (People's Parliament) is the 135 acre People’s Park within which is the 70 acre People's Square. Used for celebrating events of national importance, e.g. Armed Forces Day and Independence Day, this urban space contains an esplanade lined with indigenous plants and trees. Offering a spectacular view east to Shwe Dagon Pagoda the space once formed part of Queen Shin Sawbu’s palace grounds (in the fifteenth century), and a golf course after the arrival of the British in Rangoon. However, other substantial open areas and natural features can be found in this part of the city, including Kan Daw Gyi Lake, which was used by the British from the late-1800s to supply clean water to the city. Developed as a reservoir in the 1870s to stave off the threats of water-borne disease and drought, and to provide water in case of a downtown fire, Kan Daw Gyi Lake now doubles as a recreation center and a hub for high-rise hotels and associated facilities such as restaurants.

North of the Shwe Dagon Pagoda district is a locality that has as its central feature a large body of water: Inya Lake (formerly Victoria Lake). Functioning from the late 1800s as a service reservoir to supply Rangoon with “pure and abundant” water (Pearn, 1939, p. 255), the area today has a reputation for recreation and affluence, a standing vastly different to what it was at the time of the British era when the area was characterized as being jungle and swamp with a host of dangerous animals within. Now some of the wealthiest of local society reside in the district. Furthermore the area, once situated at the very edge of the city, was developed from the end of the 1800s in accord with the lines of a settlement in Britain. Hence outlying features typical of a large-sized British city such as cemeteries and a university were sited there. Rangoon

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University was established in 1878 as an affiliated educational institute of the University of Calcutta, and its quality meant it rapidly acquired a reputation for not only being Burma’s top center for advanced learning but for being one of South East Asia’s finest educational schools. Notably, with time, Rangoon University acquired another reputation, as it became tagged as a seat for civil dispute, as demonstrations against British rule in 1920, 1936, and 1938 testified. However following national independence in 1948 the university maintained its status as a nursery for anti-governmental thinking. Incidents of unrest in Rangoon in 1962, 1974, 1988, and 1996 were all closely tied to the university and its students.

As the suburbs of Rangoon have grown, and previously greenfield sites built upon, the city has evolved along distinctly ethnic lines. Broadly speaking, downtown has traditionally housed the Chinese, Indian, and poorest Burmese populations, whereas the areas at the urban fringe contained the British, European, and wealthier Burmese communities. As urbanization was especially encouraged after 1900 so as to eradicate swamps and decongest the increasingly overcrowded central district, areas such as those in proximity to Inya Lake and Kan Daw Gyi Lake became the locales where a modestly sized but nonetheless significant Burmese population resided. As time passed these individuals took an increasingly important role in local society. Educated and employed in business or colonial administration they, with their access to Western life, were able by the 1930s argues Charney (2005, pp. 41–44) to disseminate a new Burmese self-awareness. This was no longer tied to the colonial past but was more precisely grounded in an internationalized present – a present all the more obvious because of improvements in international communication and transport, which linked Rangoon with other parts of the world. From this cultural setting this Burmese community called for additional rights for local citizens, much to the chagrin of the colonial government. In light of this actuality Rangoon’s suburbs must be recognized as playing a central role in starting a political process that shifted Burma from a colonial to a post-colonial state of being.

In comprehending the post-colonial shaping of suburban Rangoon, three tenets must be recognized: commercial growth; the promotion of the city’s religious economy; and the relocation of the population. Manifest through political frameworks these three principles have radically affected how the outlying districts have developed and, in some instances, been redeveloped by the end of the last century. By way of example, whilst attention has already been given to the ongoing renewal of the central district, redevelopment of sites has also transpired outside the urban core. For example, Rangoon’s largest colonial era burial ground, Kyandaw Cemetery, a 50-acre expanse of land about half a mile from Rangoon University was in 1996 built upon. Whereas the graveyard was once purposefully sited at the outskirts of Rangoon, the spatial expansion of the city throughout the last century has swallowed it, making it into the instigation of the Open Economy policy in the late-1980s a target for property developers. With land perceived in the open economic era as a commodity, sites considered to be of strategic significance, no matter what their former use, have been subject to redevelopment. Hence cemeteries have been replaced with shopping centers, supermarkets, and housing (Haing Oo, 1997). What burial grounds there are of any substantial size in Rangoon do not lie within central or suburban locales anymore, but are found within the new townships formed by the late-1980s.

The suburbs have also played a vital role in the present national government’s drive towards what it calls “monumental Buddhism”. New religious sites have been built, historic pagodas renovated, a Buddhist Missionary University founded, and a number of monumental buddhas erected, e.g. Thatbyinnyu Pagoda in North Okkalapa Township, under the Ministry of Religious Affairs’ charge to preserve and propagate Buddhism. This political advocacy of Buddhism acts to legitimate the junta and permits the ruling elites an opportunity to procure urban sites loaded with revolutionary associations. This, pragmatically speaking, weakens the ability of Buddhist organizations to mobilize people in times of unrest. Therefore, as Buddhism has been both an historical and contemporary cultural umbrella under which Burmese people have resisted the power of the State, the governmental reaction to events such as unrest in the city in 1988, for example, has ensured that by ‘occupying’ religion and its buildings the future potential for civil disorder is quelled, and a common cultural-religious identity forged as a substitute for a lack of nationhood.

The redevelopment of land in Rangoon, as well as the forced relocation of people, began prior to the junta. Slum clearances occurred during the colonial era and in the 1950s, just a handful of years after independence, the government sought to relocate people so as to reduce overpopulation and social problems in and about the center of Rangoon. This rehousing of squatters and slum dwellers though proved to be very unpopular, and by 1957 less than 3000 families had been moved. So to help encourage the outward movement of the population after 1957 public policy was widened to include housing estate development in Yankin and Thwawan, to improve infrastructure, clean the city, and construct new towns. Due to the location of rivers about the city, and marsh land along the river banks, the construction of three new towns took place to the north of Rangoon’s sprawl, and so successful was the new town concept – in part due to a high birth rate at that time, and high immigration of people from the countryside – that by the end of the 1950s 195,000 (15% of the city’s population), lived in the new settlements of North Okkalapa, South Okkalapa, and Tharkayta. The implementation of new towns at the fringe of Rangoon, a ploy by the State to colonize Rangoon’s periphery, fully took off in the late-1980s. Satellite towns were established then, at least according to the government, to rehouse those in squatter communities10 who had lost their homes to fires, and to house public sector employees. With the founding of Dagon Myothit, Shwepyihtar, and Haing Thayar soon after 1988, not only did the north–south dimension of Rangoon grow from 14 to 23 miles, but the shape of the city changed from a rectangular to diamond-form (Nwe, 1998). With seven other new townships developed soon after provision was made to rehouse one million people. By the turn of the century 253,000 homes of 600–1000 square feet had been developed, and 450,000 people relocated from central districts. In spatial terms the advancement of local societies was evident in the emergence of an east–west spatial axis across suburban Rangoon, socially via the “hut to apartment” policy removing squatter areas and, in conjunction, improved quality of shelter for poor families in new towns, and in cultural terms by the construction of many new Buddhist sites in the new towns.

Alongside the construction of new towns, bridges and industrial zones were also created after 1993. In environmental terms the establishment of bridges such as the Bayintnaung Bridge removed natural barriers that had historically restricted Rangoon’s urban sprawl, e.g. Haing River and Bago River. Permitting the city to jump what were once obstacles, industrial development was undertaken to create employment opportunities in the new towns, and fulfill the wider need to expand Rangoon’s economy. In urban morphological terms this occurrence was important as the historical industrial zone of the city, its riverbanks, acquired less prominence as new towns devoted enormous tracts of land for industry: 400 ha of Haing Thayar’s 566 ha area were dedicated to industrial uses. In economic and political terms by mobilizing the private sector for housing and jobs in Rangoon the role of the Burmese government switched from provider to facilitator.

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10 In 1980 more than 400,000 squatters resided in Rangoon.

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Furthermore as the government established massive industrial areas to capture foreign investment (Win, 2011) (a monetary amount that reached US$20 billion in 2010) large privately-owned plastic, food processing, and garment factories became major sub-urban features, thus offering employment prospects to the hundreds of thousands of people who were moved out of central districts and, in theory, not only removing the hardships they had experienced in their prior locales but allowing the government too to acquire increased economic management capital, as in prior years the governmental policy of political isolationism had disconnected Burma from overseas sources of expertise. To supplement economic and social development in the new towns, universities were built yet, crucially, despite these new settlements being situated within the bounds of Rangoon they have become isolated communities within the metropolis. Located at distances that can take up to 2 h by public transport, a spatial and cultural disconnect between the city core and periphery has emerged – a matter evident in other South East Asian cities. This is a deliberate means to subjugate perceived dangerous elements in local society, and in spite of plans to create new urban worlds free of the predicaments that had historically affected Rangoon the lack of industry in some satellite towns, e.g. Shwepyitha New Town, has merely transplanted economic hardship from central to peripheral Rangoon. The city’s suburbs have never been such socially and economically marginalized environments.

Notwithstanding that much of suburban Rangoon’s development takes the form of low cost housing, the introduction of a market-orientated economy has led to a blossoming of private construction activities, amongst which is housing for middle class members of society, high end housing estates, and golf course projects. In a country where per capita income was estimated in 2010 at about US$40 a month the conversion of paddy fields into exclusive recreational and housing areas befitting the lifestyles of the wealthiest of the world is clearly beyond the economic range of the vast majority of the Burmese population. With 50% of gated communities such as the 630 acre Pun Hlaing Estate to Pun Hlaing Golf Estate (2011) in Hlaing Thayar New Town now owned by foreigners, and with its golf course designed by Gary Player, such environments attracting the elites of world business reveal the country’s desire to show to the world that it is a modern place of opportunity.

Conclusion

Colonial rule, in the words of Charney (2009, p. 5), established much of the Rangoon seen by the world today. In environmental terms at least, as this paper has indicated, this is somewhat true yet it has also been shaped, and reshaped, since the 1980s by changing political and economic landscapes. In coming to terms with what Rangoon really is, a place of opportunity and threat, certain matters have to be grasped.

As is the case with Burma as a whole, Rangoon is currently economically underdeveloped, and contains an omnipresent informal economic sector. Yet economic progress is visually afoot, and is symptomatic of a unified, globalized urban logic. As has been shown with the development of other South East Asian cities, e.g. Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia (Bunnell, Barter, & Mordorshi, 2002), the complexity and distinctiveness of local historical, cultural, and political contexts means that despite a marked increase in the construction of office buildings, hotels, and shopping malls a number of distinguishing urban and cultural features persist which thus enables each city to have its own distinct nature.

The forceful eviction of huge numbers of people, and the creation of outlying new towns has reoriented the city in morphological and cultural terms. Whereas the city historically grew outwards from the colonial core now the geographical orientation of the settlement has started to shift. The city in many respects no longer has the downtown as its point of reference. Instead the city is now ringed by a collection of new towns forming an east–west axis which, to all intents and purposes, is disconnected from the city given the distance, lack of transport, and the poverty of the new town populations. Much of Rangoon’s environmental change in the past two to three decades is the outcome of the government’s response to civil unrest. The junta’s interest in Buddhist activities and the building of religious edifices in the city’s suburbs demonstrates this. The meaning and use of public spaces, e.g. People’s Park, has also been subject to scrutiny in light of sporadic cases of civil unrest.

Due to the scarcity of official statistics on Rangoon society it is impossible to accurately ascertain, for instance, the population size or the economic value of the city to the nation. The contribution of Rangoon’s economy to national development is unknown and can hardly be determined in the small amount of public-paid infrastructure projects that have occurred in the city in past decades. However, with private investment in offices, housing, and factory buildings totaling tens of millions of US dollars, it can be presumed that Rangoon has contributed a significant quantity of capital to the nation’s growth and is the commercial hub of Burma.

With the loss of capital city status in 2005 many uncertainties regarding Rangoon’s development have arisen. This uncertainty has been exacerbated by the reality of its built environment: it is an aging city inside of which investment in the upkeep of buildings has for decades not keep pace with the demographic demands and economic needs of the population. That is why Rangoon is now a place of differentiation and, on the face of it, contradiction. The drive to modernity sits alongside age-old Buddhist values, streets from the colonial period are lined by decrepit historic buildings and gleaming high-rise towers, small workshops where people toil for one dollar a day are situated not far from office blocks filled with employees of foreign companies making multi-million dollar decisions. High-end gated communities are sited within a stone-throw of derelict structures at the urban core or new towns at the urban fringe.

Despite environmental changes in Rangoon under the banner of development, and in 2005 there were 135 ongoing development projects, there is little evidence that the current government, with its lengthy grip on power, has been able to solve the social and economic woes of the city. As it is, Rangoon concurrently allures and depresses. The transformation of the city at both the urban core and fringe has in past decades been underpinned by a national

13 According to official data Rangoon in the 2010–2011 financial year accounted for 23% of the nation’s Gross Domestic Product (i.e. 8.9 trillion kyats).

14 The evolving cityscape of Rangoon should not necessarily be read as being symptomatic of a unified, globalized urban logic. As has been shown with the development of other South East Asian cities, e.g. Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia (Bunnell, Barter, & Mordorshi, 2002), the complexity and distinctiveness of local historical, cultural, and political contexts means that despite a marked increase in the construction of office buildings, hotels, and shopping malls a number of distinguishing urban and cultural features persist which thus enables each city to have its own distinct nature.

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political and ideological framework, and in spite of this author’s effort to stay clear of political commentary the subject is unavoidable in explaining the evolution of Rangoon. The governmental framework is an ever-present theme in the shaping and reshaping of this narrative. It is inescapable, in fact, for the city’s phases of new town developments after colonial rule ended. Furthermore the move from a socialist-style to a market-driven economy has come about as a result of political discourse, and the sheer scale of changes in Rangoon, particularly at its urban fringe during the 1980s, and 1990s, was a response to challenges identified by the junta. Whilst it is unclear as to the direction public policy will take, Rangoon’s environmental transformation in the future, the continuation of social and economic problems within Rangoon in the past couple of decades, and the likelihood that they are not soon to end, is testament to the capacity of the multi-ethnic local population to abide with whatever predicaments life launches at them, and should inspire scholars to debate the future of Rangoon (The Economist, 2012a). In light of the paucity of published work on the city and its built environment there is much to research and learn.

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