

seem to have taken little interest in matters beyond their religious duties. The Jesuit Valguarnera compiled the first dictionary of Siamese in the mid 17th century, but no copy has survived. Any hope that our knowledge of 17th-century Ayutthaya will be expanded by a Portuguese account to put aside those of the French, Dutch, Chinese, and Persians seems to be forlorn.

Smith makes a couple of rather bizarre errors, such as displacing Prince Prisdang's mission by two centuries, but otherwise this is a very thorough work of research and a fascinating analysis which will undoubtedly stand the test of time.

Chris Baker

*30 Heritage Buildings of Yangon: Inside the City that Captured Time* by Sarah Rooney (Chicago: Serindia Publications, 2012). ISBN 978-1932476620 (hard)

Few visitors to Myanmar are not struck by the wealth of surviving colonial architecture in Yangon, preserved, for better or worse, by the country's long isolation and stunted economic growth since Independence. Indeed, Yangon, formerly Rangoon, is likely the choicest spot in all of Asia to appreciate an urban colonial setting which has virtually vanished everywhere else. The very character of once regal cities, from Colombo to Saigon to Hong Kong, has been irrevocably fractured by thoughtless and unbridled urban development. Only has old Yangon been spared such a sorry fate, but the city's future now hangs in the balance by the rapid economic changes anticipated in Myanmar.

Sweeping new political progress and the concomitant relaxation of international sanctions have indeed triggered a race by rapacious foreign and Myanmarese investors keen to erect shopping malls and business parks in the wake of the wrecking ball. The prognosis for Yangon is not a happy one, since commercial pressures too often trump the goals of preservation, as history amply demonstrates in Asia and throughout the world. The single overarching thrust of this compelling book is the need to respect, protect and nurture Yangon's rich architectural heritage in light of these new threats. Like endangered species, these heritage buildings can never be replaced.

The book opens with a tribute to old Yangon by U Thaw Kaung, a well-known savant who for decades served as the Chief Librarian at the Universities Central Library. His first-hand experiences, such as shopping at the now-closed Rowe & Company department store opposite the City Hall, provide poignant reminders that the city's boarded up landmarks were once centers of urban life.

The Association of Myanmar Architects selected the thirty buildings that are treated by the book's author, Sarah Rooney. The thirty are mostly public structures

in the city's central district and ones that long-time visitors to Yangon will recognize immediately. The earliest is the derelict Pegu Club (1882), while the most recent is the Chartered Bank (1941). The text divides the monuments into six clusters, based on their location, such as "Around the Secretariat" and "Along Strand Road." Each building is assigned a number which is tagged to a two-page map of Yangon at the beginning of the text.

A handful of the buildings are still used for their original purposes, such as the Strand Hotel, but the majority have witnessed multiple uses throughout their long lives. For example, the imposing British Embassy facing Strand Road was originally the home for a Scottish insurance and shipping company. Another is the neo-Classical Inland Waterways Department building, also facing Strand Road, established in 1933 as the new headquarters for the venerable Irrawaddy Flotilla Company.

A number of former official buildings are now abandoned, occasioned in some cases by the government's move in 2005 to Nay Pyi Taw, notably the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on Pyay Road. These disused structures were especially vulnerable to damage wrought by Cyclone Nargis in 2008.

The Introduction sketches the modern history of Yangon, beginning with the annexation of Lower Myanmar at the end of the Second Anglo-Burmese War (1852-1853). A grid plan adopted in 1853 has remained largely intact, with the Sule Pagoda serving as a central hub. The area encompassing the city center was originally a vast swamp which was filled in by shifting millions of cubic feet of earth from higher ground. The observer Colesworthy Grant wryly noted in the 1840s that the area resembled "a Dutch village half under water."

For each building, the architect's name, the construction firm and important dates are provided, to the degree that this information is known. Old black-and-white photographs documenting the buildings under construction enhance the text, together with a handful of architectural drawings and page after page of crisp color photographs that were taken recently, mostly by Natthaphat Meksriwan, who is also credited with the handsome book design.

A handy single-page synopsis telescopes the careers of six major architects who shaped early Rangoon, such as James Ransome, who designed the High Court facing Mahabandoola Park. Another Yangon architect, Henry Hoyne-Fox, even directed the rebuilding of the Mahamuni Temple in Mandalay, reducing the weight of its tower by drawing upon Brunelleschi's solution for the dome in Florence.

Concluding each section is a short essay touching on facets of the city's history. The first, "World Famous Residents of Dalhousie Road", recounts Pablo Neruda's time in Yangon and his love for a local woman; one fictitious Yangon resident was a local "Sherlock Holmes", created by Shwe U Daung in the 1930s. The last essay, "Yangon Renovations: Successes and Challenges", details the restoration of several smaller downtown properties, such as a restaurant named Monsoon whose ambiance

is meant to “recreate the atmosphere of the colonial era”, in the words of one of its owners. The wicker-look of the Strand Hotel lobby also exemplifies this aesthetic trend in interior design, a style one might dub “raj-chic.” While “colonialism” has earned a bad name in general, it seems, somewhat paradoxically, that colonial décor is in vogue.

The book’s compact format makes it an ideal companion on a walking tour of Yangon. To comfortably cover the majority of the monuments on foot would likely require two full days, perhaps with leisurely lunch-breaks at one of the *biryani* restaurants on Anawrahta Road.

The unsightly glass-faced, high-rise office blocks built in the late 1990s on the west side of Mahabandoola Park are dramatic testimony to the dangers of urban blight. Moreover, Yangon’s core is comprised largely of stately but derelict apartment buildings from the colonial era, now home to everyday Yangon residents. The day may come when these desirable, magnificent older neighborhoods face gentrification, forcing longtime residents to the city’s peripheries in order to make way for Myanmarese elites and expats employed by multinational companies. This phenomenon has occurred in cities worldwide, and there is no reason that Yangon’s trajectory will be any different. Finally, if the government’s abysmal and notorious record of preservation and renovation at Pagan, starting in the 1990s, is a harbinger of the city’s future, then Yangon’s fate is truly sealed.

The hope is that Serindia Press will be encouraged by the reception of this outstanding book to produce other volumes with a similar format, with perhaps a focus on the many other architectural gems in Yangon and also the rich architectural traditions of Myanmar’s other major cities, such as Mandalay, Moulmein and Sittwe.

Donald M. Stadtner

*Lacquerware Journeys: The Untold Story of Burmese Lacquer* by Than Htun (Dedaye) (Bangkok: River Books, 2013). ISBN 978 616 7339 238

This important addition to the literature on Burmese lacquer will be welcomed both by the enthusiast and those new to the subject. It is well designed and profusely illustrated, with over 650 photographs, the vast majority of lacquer objects, and most of high quality. Adequate space is allotted to the better known centres of manufacture, such as Bagan [Pagan], Kyaukka, and Mandalay. But the book’s particular strength is the author’s documentation and revival from obscurity of a number of neglected and almost forgotten lacquer industries. U Than Htun comes from a family of goldsmiths, but suspects that his great grandmother, a trader in the town of Dedaye, had ancestors connected to Bagan, who may have been lacquer artists. He brings a