Hafsa Idrees
The Dilemma of Urban Heritage; a Study of George Town and Yangon

Ente di afferenza:
  ()

The Dilemma of Urban Heritage; a study of George Town and Yangon

by Hafsa Idrees

Introduction

«Urban heritage» as a term was first used in 1931 by Gustavo Giovannoni[1]. However, its use has become more popular recent decades. Since the mid-XXth century, the concept has been closely connected to the restoration and conservation of European historic centres but with time, urban conservation has extended from Europe – with the help of organizations like UNESCO – to other parts of the world too, and it now goes beyond structures as it integrates economic, cultural and functional aspects[2]. For this study, heritage is operationalised as urban structures with exceptional cultural/historic value and associated infrastructure.

A basic dilemma of city planning is that planners can make plans, but the development of the city depends on the practices of the citizens. This leads to a discrepancy between customary technocratic planning ideas and the communicative practices of those living in the city[3]. In the XVIth and XVIIth century, the dominant model was Renaissance, thus a «top down» approach evolved

---

[1] G. Giovannoni, *Vecchie città ed edilizia nuova*, Torino, Unione Tipografico Editrice Torinese, 1931.

[2] M. García-Hernández, *Urban Heritage*, 2019, available online at https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199874002/obo-9780199874002-0208.xml.

[3] R. Korff, *The Developmental City*, 2018, in T. Menkhoff, S.N. Kan, H.-D. Evers and Y.W. Chay, *Living in Smart Cities; Innovation and Sustainability*, Singapore, World Scientific Publishing Company, pp. 481-501, available online at https://www.worldscientific.com/worldscibooks/10.1142/10785.

in urban planning. Later, it was modernization. The old city centres either were already in decline or fell into decline through sub-urbanization. In addition, their structures resembled the past and were «traditional» in nature, a characteristic that was supposed to be overcome. This heritage, with its tangible and non-tangible aspects, was treated as «alien» because of unwanted associations. However, religious structures were usually an exception.

Perhaps as a reflexion of post-colonial discourses and globalization, identity politics became relevant, and so too the idea to maintain cultural heritage as an important part of cultural identity. Identities have various forms, but are often related to power relationships[4]. This, however, led to a dilemma: *what is the cultural heritage of a colonial city*? On one hand, the old buildings of the colonial administration as well as the colonial banks, offices, department stores and hotels etc. refer to a past in which their own culture was subjugated under colonialism. On the other hand, most of the cities were centres of in-migration and minorities, and thereby featured styles were not aligned with the propagated nationalism. The meaning of «city» is often defined by its heritage[5].

While planning the modern city, new centres were established. For the planners, the old parts of the city posed several problems, such as insufficient infrastructure with often narrow streets and overcrowded houses etc. These old centres turned into marginal areas in terms of space as well as economic activities and cultures. This happened particularly in those cities that experienced economic development and had a rather efficient administration. Urban reconstruction intended to modernize these old

---

[4] M. Castells, *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*, in «The Power of Identity», vol. 2, n. 19, 2009, Blackwell.

[5] In post-colonial cities, we often find modernity, e.g. Chandigarh and Brasilia, which can often be defined as «hyper modernity» as well. The eventual idea was to look like the developed «West». Some South East Asian cities like Kuala Lumpur initially followed this idea and tried to connect the present with their pre-colonial times (skipping the colonial era and all its aspects), however when bureaucracy took over, the approaches changed.

quarters. An example is Singapore, and to a lesser degree Kuala Lumpur and Bangkok[6].

Since the last decade, a new world model has emerged, not least due to the world heritage projects of UNESCO. This implies that instead of tearing down the old city, heritage should be maintained, so that the history of the city becomes visible. It also aims at keeping the history alive. Several old parts have now become world heritage sites, for example the old quarters of Georgetown. This is encouraging many other such cities to follow in these footsteps and grab the last straw before drowning. An example is Yangon, the formal administrative city and capital of Myanmar. However, in most cases, this idea is highly romanticised, and the consequences are often undesired. The establishment of heritage sites within a dynamic city faces several dilemmas:

1) Land use as heritage does not allow the realization of rapidly rising land values.
2) Old quarters are usually occupied by poorer people who are engaged in multiple economic activities related to the informal sector. With the establishment of a heritage site (renovation of buildings, beautification etc.) gentrification sets in, leading to displacement of former inhabitants.
3) The costs of renovation and restoration are often very high and the landowners are unwilling to pay for it, as they cannot make adequate profits.
4) The public is often less interested in conservation, as the old quarters refer to a colonial past and/or minority. The fact that these areas are of interest to tourists, i.e. aliens, does not strengthen local awareness of the importance of these quarters for their own history and culture.

---

[6] In Singapore they noticed that all the «heritage» had gone. They rebuilt old quarters based on the photographs! In Kuala Lumpur and Bangkok, we still find some older quarters that have been renovated over the past years.

The background of urban heritage in George Town and Yangon

For the study, two South East Asian cities are selected: George Town on Penang island, and Yangon in Myanmar. Both were part of British colonial rule and, accordingly, urban planning. One important feature used to be that the cities were mainly inhabited by migrant communities with their own administration, which led to the rise of the so-called «plural society».

George Town, the capital of Penang, presents a fascinating fusion of various cultures, embracing modernity but also retaining the colonial tradition. Penang's origins are somewhat unknown, but settlements were found in 1700s when the East India Company handed the island over to Captain Francis Light in 1786, who later established George Town. In the old quarters of the city, the vernacular architecture is characterized by Chinese and Indian styles. The city reflects the plural society with the respective spaces and spatial practices of different immigrant groups such as Chinese, Indians, Europeans etc. In the early XXth century, the landowners moved into the suburbs and rented the old houses to new migrants. With the possibilities of new and more profitable land use, the land was sold and new structures, e.g. hotels, shopping centres, office blocks etc., were built[7]. After a struggle of nearly twenty years, the old city finally became a world heritage site in 2008.

Yangon was the centre of British colonial rule in Burma (present-day Myanmar). Although an early Burmese settlement existed, the city was newly built and planned according to then-in-practice British planning ideas i.e. the checkboard pattern. It was mainly inhabited by Indians, and to a lesser degree Chinese. The Europeans tended to live at the fringe. In 1962 General Ne Win instigated a coup, and established a military regime following the «Burmese way to socialism». One implication was to develop

---

[7] Real estate development is still a major source of income and profit in South East Asian cities. In addition, it allows money laundering and does not require advanced business skills.

the countryside, and not invest much into Yangon, not the least because it was perceived as an alien city. The military regime persisted until 2015. The policy to not develop Yangon, especially the old city, led to a form of «conservation». Only recently, with the increase of land prices etc., ideas emerged to develop the old city based on public private partnership into a modern place characterized by high rise buildings. There are several NGOs that are trying to maintain the heritage, but the cause is turning into a mix of remembering history and global consumer capital. Myanmar is often short on both capacity and cash; therefore, it tends to form symbiotic relationships with businessmen. Even though they developed the city, this eventually gave rise to a culture of rigged tenders. An example is the «Secretariat», Yangon's most iconic building. The NGOs had some success, but they faced strong obstacles, not least because heritage is mainly interpreted as religious – especially Buddhist – sites. In contrast to George Town, most of the houses belong to those living in them or are public buildings. Moreover, many of these became run down when they lost their function after Naypyidaw became the new capital.

Apart from that, there are consequential non-structural aspects of urban heritage too, that are relevant and important. They roughly include specific practices, rituals, cultural values, sentiments, and ideas. Since both cities have been a mix of various ethnicities, cultures, religions and nationalities, the non-structural part is significantly germane and pertinent.

Research question

The leading question of the project is: How can urban heritage be implemented without creating «open air museums», gentrification and eviction etc.? A top down approach from a planning perspective does not work, as urban life is based on the practices of the citizens. Since this is a working paper and the research is still in process, the focus is on the South-Asian communities in the two cities mentioned above. The eventual aim is to determine what role heritage plays for the citizens, and how do they engage (or want to engage) in maintaining their heritage.

Hypothesis

As Yangon attempts to adopt tourism as one of its main development axes, by introducing radical symbolic and material transformations in new and old structures, the social actors must be aware of the respective consequences and warnings. George Town could be used as a reference. According to the hypothesis of this study, more emphasis is being paid in Yangon and George Town on consumption, economic value extraction and investment and less representation and attention is given to the needs and demands of the local and vulnerable citizens, who pay the price. A top down approach from a planning perspective is not always the magic solution, and citizens should be made an integral part of the decisions concerning urban planning.

The clash between urban planners and citizens

Cities are often compared with living entities. Structural issues are for the most not the primary reason buildings come to their end; it is rather the purpose that changes with time. Referring to the colonial time, many buildings in Yangon were built by the British for different (mainly administrative) purposes, but unlike the colonisers in South America, they didn't settle but eventually left. Then the buildings lost their meaning. As reported by Yangon Heritage Trust (YHT), 35% of Yangon (about 1,800 buildings) was destroyed by developers and planners between 1900-2011 as they built newer structures[8]. Most of the heritage was gone for little benefit in return. However, with the recent emergence of identity politics, the rest of the buildings have indirectly become «central to the consumption of colonial nostalgia via tourism»[9]. As the corporate realised the value of refurbishing some of the colonial buildings, important structures become potential sources of

---

[8] P. Heijmans, *The Struggle to Save Yangon's Architectural Heritage*, BBC News, 2015, available online at https://www.bbc.com/news/business-31146066.

[9] J.M. Cheer and K.J. Reeves, *Colonial Heritage and Tourism: Ethnic Landscape Perspectives*, in «Journal of Heritage Tourism», vol. 10, n. 2, 2015, pp. 151-166, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/174387 3X.2014.985224.

money[10]. Cultural and non-cultural heritage protection is a global problem, especially in terms of how it should be done and by whom. Restoration is undoubtedly expensive. According to Daw Moe Moe Lwin, director of the YHT, only 189 buildings in Yangon have the protection of municipal government, while urban planners are still clueless about the operationalised definition of «heritage»[11]. Much has been debated about the importance of protecting the colonial heritage in the downtown Yangon, but less has been said about how to finance it while balancing other priorities in this rapidly growing city where most people are already indebted, have limited access to secure housing, and are poor. Moreover, heritage conservation conflicts with some progressive social policies, too. Getting rid of old shambles and replacing them with high rises can certainly help alleviate some of the city's crisis including affordable housing, and prevent its transformation into an open-air museum. As with urban planning, the decisions about heritage conservation lack the representation of locals. This study will also therefore focus on the citizens (South Asian community) and how they perceive these narratives/decisions. There is a need to find a balance between the interests of the public and the city planners.

George Town, on the other hand, followed a rather modern strategy. The Chew Jetty, rationalising the need of international involvement, turned to UNESCO for rescue. In 2008, the city protected itself to some degree, but this can also be interpreted as an undesired suicide. As soon as the city acquired the status of «heritage site», the tide of invasive tourism engulfed it and daily intrusion took a troll. The UNESCO branding made the city look very tempting in terms of economy, but the main purpose – i.e. preserving the cultural/heritage which drew the initial recognition – was compromised. The «universal value» of these locations inevitably opens the door to commercialization. Also, protection of cultural heritage is not al-

---

[10] P. Janssen, *In Yangon, More Colonial Buildings Are Being Preserved as Homeowners Realise They Can Profit from Heritage*, in «South China Morning Post», 2018, available online at https://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/article/2148481/yangon-more-colonial-buildings-are-being-preserved-homeowners-realise-they.

[11] P. Heijmans, *The Struggle to Save Yangon's Architectural Heritage*, cit.

ways a «common good» in cities with a dark colonial past. In the case of George Town, the residents do not seem united on the city's future.

Tentative conclusion

City is a process that is defined by cultural interpretation, and it therefore connects the people together[12]. Cities develop over time, but several dilemmas associated with this development remain, for instance, what should be done with the old parts, what significance do they have and how to approach the heritage? «More recently, heritage has superseded conservation, where marketing of heritage as a product according to the demands of the consumer, mainly tourists, has resulted in the commercialization of heritage over conservation values»[13]. The planning of historic cities therefore gets influenced by the symbiosis of heritage and tourism. «A city is a creation of people for people»[14] for better or worse, but urban planners usually ignore this fact as they go for superblocks, skyscrapers, and urban utopias. The discourse of heritage preservation also suffers from such practices. Intelligent planning embodies the preservation of a city's individuality after understanding it as it exists. It implies that city planners must integrate the plans into projected and existing patterns of social organization and culture. Heritage conservation is a complex phenomenon and the nature of the dilemma cannot be pinpointed because of the clash between architectural conservation and places where people live, economic value extraction and heritage conservation, mass touristification and traditional uses of the city, but the top down approach is not the solution.

---

[12] S. Sutton and P. Susan, *The Paradox of Urban Space: Inequality and Transformation in Marginalized Communities*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

[13] N. Nasser, *Planning for Urban Heritage Places: Reconciling Conservation, Tourism, and Sustainable Development*, in «Journal of Planning Literature», vol. 17, n. 4, 2003, pp. 467-479, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/0885412203017004001.

[14] R.K. Brown, *The Dilemma of Urban Planning*, in «Land Economics», vol. 37, n. 3, 1961, pp. 260-263, DOI: 10.2307/3159725.

HAFSA IDREES is an experienced entrepreneur and researcher with a demonstrated history of working in the field of anthropology and urban studies. After obtaining a master's degree (in Anthropology) in Pakistan, she achieved a master's in Development Studies and is currently doing PhD from the University of Passau, Germany, in Urban Sociology with a focus on South and South East Asia. Having co-founded the only self publishing house in Pakistan in 2013, she has also been working closely with the local writers in particular from ethnic and religious minorities. She also had the honour of receiving the Chancellor Medal for her M.phil degree in Anthropology from Quaid-i-Azam University, which is the highest academic accolade a student can receive in Pakistan.