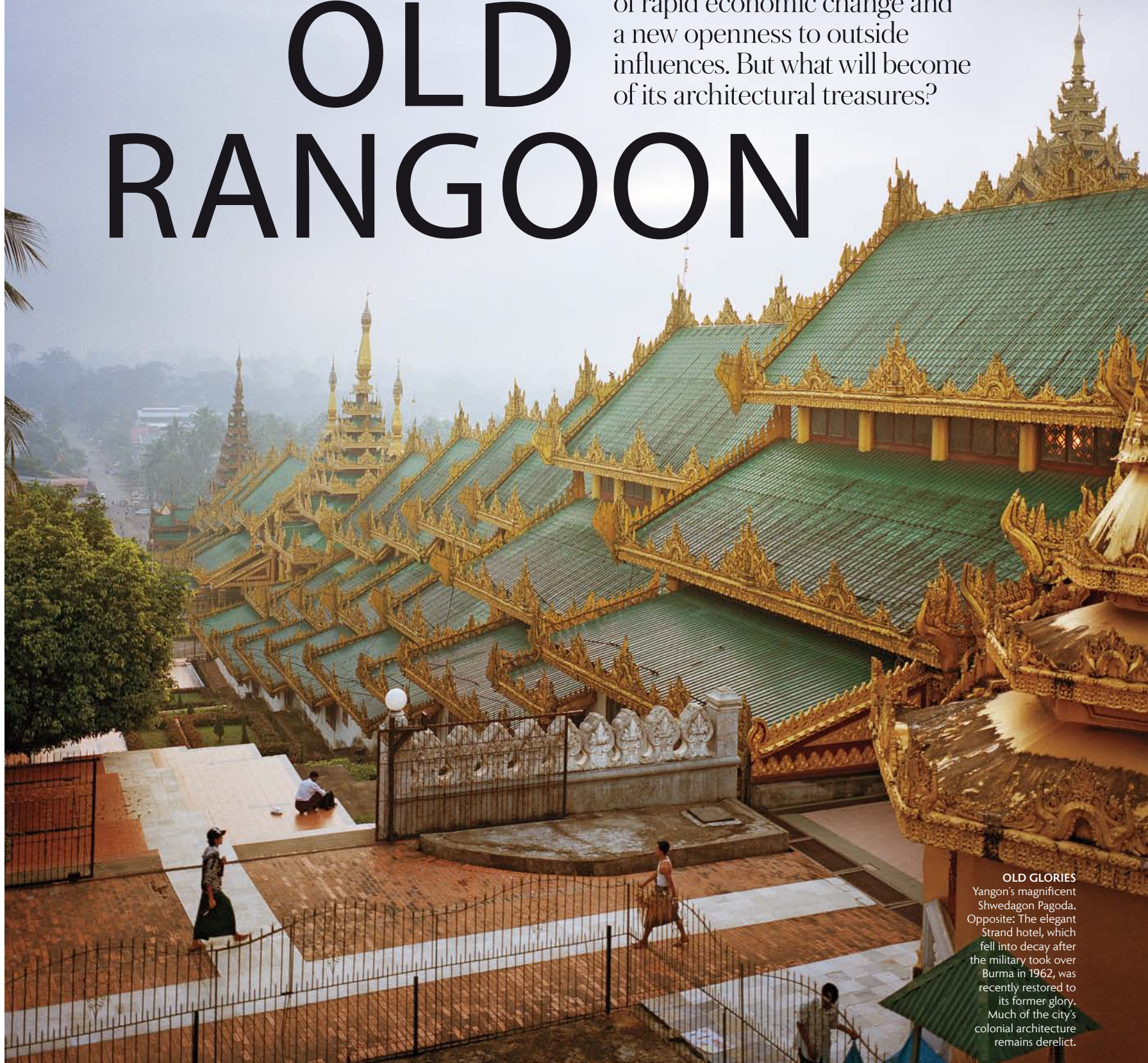


# SAVING OLD RANGOON

With the easing of sanctions and censorship laws, Myanmar, long isolated by decades of military rule, is on the verge of rapid economic change and a new openness to outside influences. But what will become of its architectural treasures?



**OLD GLORIES**  
Yangon's magnificent Shwedagon Pagoda. Opposite: The elegant Strand hotel, which fell into decay after the military took over Burma in 1962, was recently restored to its former glory. Much of the city's colonial architecture remains derelict.





**A**S WE SIT IN YANGON peak-hour traffic, Thant Myint-U is conjuring a golden age. The eminent Burmese historian, academic and former United Nations official has devoted much of the last two years to saving the city's spectacular architecture. Despite the gridlock as we slowly nudge through its colonial heart, we couldn't be better placed to recall the glories of old Rangoon (as Yangon was once known). It's difficult to remember today, thanks to nearly five decades of Myanmar's political isolation under brutal military rule, but there was a time when it was one of the jewels of the British Empire.

In the 1920s, travelers from all over the world would arrive by ocean liner at the palm-fringed harbor, then plunge wide-eyed into the cosmopolitan avenues, where monks with shaved heads rubbed shoulders with English bankers and Scottish engineers and gilded pagodas glinted alongside the splendid façades of imperial buildings. Rangoon was one of the world's most vibrant ports—a key link in the trade route from Calcutta to Shanghai and a place that lured royals, celebrities, artists and adventurers. Nearly everyone of note stayed at the stately Strand hotel—which boasted one of the finest European restaurants in Asia—an enclave of European style

founded by the same Armenian family who owned Singapore's Raffles. They would soon join the frenzied expat parties in private clubs, where gallons of champagne were drunk on humid nights scented with tropical flowers and jazz bands played until dawn under the slowly beating fans.

Rangoon's romantic image was fueled by a parade of writers. Somerset Maugham was entranced when he visited in 1922, writing that he could lose himself in the city "as a cup of water thrown overboard is lost in the Irrawaddy." After joining the social whirlwind, Noël Coward was inspired to pen *Mad Dogs and Englishmen*. ("In Rangoon the heat of noon is just what the natives shun," he crooned.) Pablo Neruda was posted here as consul in 1927 and began a torrid affair with a beautiful woman he called his "Burmese panther." (Her mad fits of jealousy inspired *Widower's Tango*.) The young Eric Blair—better known by his pen name, George Orwell—visited whenever he needed a break from his wretched life as a provincial policeman in Burma. And Hollywood added to the city's allure with steamy movies like *Moon Over Burma*, starring Dorothy Lamour as an American siren, and *Mandalay*, where Kay Francis plays a sultry Russian émigré in a decadent Rangoon nightclub.

The romance began to fade after 1962, when a socialist military junta seized control of Burma and began cutting it off from the rest of the world. For the next half century, an array of ruthless and incompetent generals pushed the country deeper toward economic ruin, turning it into a pariah state. Even when its military rulers decided to promote tourism in the '90s, only a trickle of visitors came, due to the country's crumbling infrastructure, the short visa stays and the urging of opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi for travelers to avoid the country. Burma became one of the world's great time capsules. Nationalists had long since erased most of the British street names; in 1989, the government officially renamed the country Myanmar, and Rangoon became Yangon (after the modern local pronunciation).

Although the decades of stagnation were repressive and isolating, they preserved the city's wealth of British-era architecture. "Right now, Yangon is a colonial treasure with no parallel in Southeast Asia," says Thant. But Yangon is also on the verge of a construction blitz, where its historic architecture could disappear like a mirage. The region is littered with cities that have ravaged their history in the name of rapid economic progress, from Singapore to Bangkok,



“The window of opportunity is very short. In 15 years, if renovations are done properly, this could be the region’s most beautiful and livable city.”



**STILL STANDING**  
Clockwise from left: The Secretariat, former headquarters for the British and independent Burma, was abandoned in 2005 when the government moved the capital to Naypyidaw; the Secretariat’s decaying interior; the road to Bagan—in the ‘90s villagers were forcibly relocated from the archaeological site to a new town, New Bagan. Opposite: Many colonial buildings are still in use but not protected from developers.



Hanoi and Shanghai. “The window of opportunity is very short,” Thant says. “In 15 years, if renovations are done properly, this could be the region’s most beautiful and livable city.” According to Moe Moe Lwin, the general secretary of the Association of Myanmar Architects, in 15 years Yangon could be as charming as Paris—or a soulless blight. “The worst-case scenario is that Yangon turns into Jakarta,” she explains. “All the historical buildings are knocked down. The traffic is horrible. It’s inhuman.”

This threat of overdevelopment is an unexpected consequence of Myanmar’s rapid political change over the last two years. In late 2010, Aung San Suu Kyi was released from house arrest, and elections were orchestrated by the military. In 2011, the new president, Thein Sein, began an ambitious series of reforms, relaxing censorship laws and freeing political prisoners. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited at the end of the year and signaled a likely end to U.S. sanctions, bringing a wave of executives to the country like a commercial tsunami. President Obama’s visit in



November 2012 was another big step toward normalized relations with the West.

A desperate shortage of office space, hotel rooms and apartments has pushed real estate prices to San Francisco levels, and companies from China, Thailand and Korea have been eyeing historic locations in the heart of Yangon. Thant explains: “When the country began to open in 2011, everyone felt we had to change as much as possible, as quickly as possible. Very few people were paying attention to what could be lost.”

The 46-year-old Thant Myint-U is the natural candidate to save Yangon’s cosmopolitan past. Born in New York City, educated at Harvard and Cambridge, he speaks with a soft and measured English accent yet is every inch Burmese. He spent his summers in Rangoon

from the age of 10 and wears a traditional sarong-like *longyi* and a collarless jacket over a white collarless shirt. He served on three peacekeeping missions and a range of human rights projects for the United Nations (his grandfather, U Thant, was the third secretary general from 1961 to 1971), and is the author of two acclaimed books on Myanmar. When, in 2007, the military opened fire on unarmed protesters led by Buddhist monks, Thant decided to leave the UN and become more involved in his home country. These were some of Myanmar’s darkest moments—the next year, the government shamefully delayed accepting international aid after a cyclone left over 130,000 people dead—but the disasters also heralded the first steps toward change, Thant says.



Thant realized that Yangon's heritage was in danger but had little success raising the issue with local officials until late 2011, when he met with several government ministers. "I asked for a moratorium on leveling buildings over 50 years old," Thant says. "They offered me an informal commitment to hold off developers and gave me six months to come up with a plan. It wasn't so much a moratorium as a 'go-slow.'" Spurred by the deadline, Thant founded the Yangon Heritage Trust (YHT) in January 2012 and held the first conference on saving Yangon's architecture in June. The group focused on an initial 189 buildings in need of protection, mainly 19th-century synagogues, mosques, monasteries and colonial British structures.

Thant directs us past the corner of Pansodan and Merchant Streets, where neoclassical Victorian structures stretch like a faded film set. The High Court building looms in Renaissance Queen Anne style, near the Rowe and Co. department store, built in the '20s and once brimming with the latest Parisian fashions. Other buildings, still in use, evoke the crumbling charm of Old Havana, such as the Central Telegraph Office, the old offices of the Irrawaddy Flotilla Company and the Sofaer building, which once housed the Vienna Café and German photographic studios.

Around every corner, abandoned buildings stand in stately decay, vines weaving through their shattered windows—an unintended gift of the junta to preservationists. In 2005, the military government abruptly moved Myanmar's capital to a new, artificially created city 200 miles north called Naypyidaw ("abode of kings"). Residents in downtown Yangon were amazed to see truck convoys arrive to empty the contents housed inside dozens of ministry buildings in use since the 19th century, a few of which were then sealed up and abandoned. These Victorian landmarks have been moldering ever since, hulking shells in prime locations throughout the city, as well as marvelous oddities like the Pegu Club, a British officer's club that Rudyard Kipling visited in 1889, which is now deserted.

Thant directs his driver toward the most symbolic of the relics—the Secretariat, an impressive colonial edifice with monumental wings covering a full square mile. The complex was the nerve center of British rule for six decades, but despite its associations, remains sacred ground for the Burmese. It was here in 1947 that the handsome, young nationalist hero, General Aung San, the engineer of the country's independence, was tragically gunned down with most of his cabinet. (His daughter, Aung San Suu Kyi, inherited the general's enormous moral authority.)

Today, visits can only be made with special permission. As we pass the security checkpoint and enter an enormous courtyard filled with tropical greenery, even Thant drops his detached air. "Imagine if the public were allowed back

in here," he marvels. "It's very moving for Burmese people." After the clamor of Yangon's streets, it seems as if we've slipped into a silent, sepia-toned photograph. We ascend a creaking staircase to an iron grille door. Inside, one soaring light-filled chamber opens after another, lined by airy promenades. No maintenance work has been done since 2005; worse, until last October it was occupied by a cadre of policemen and their families—some 400 people who cooked on wood fires that scarred many walls. Over the years, the Art Deco lamps have been stripped, and the original domes and towers collapsed in a 1930 earthquake, but that hardly detracts from the majesty of such an extraordinary space. "The presence of these huge, empty buildings in Yangon makes the situation very different from Hanoi or Penang," says Thant. "If a ministry just sells the land, they could be knocked down. It all adds to the urgency."

It's not enough to secure preservation orders on these buildings, heritage activists have discovered. The real challenge is to make their survival commercially viable. The government opened the door to renovation of several prominent sites in early 2012, but nobody is quite sure on what criteria leases were awarded. ("The process is very opaque," says Thant dryly.) The Secretariat, for example, was offered to a local company that wanted to turn it into a vast hotel, prompting a passionate public outcry. So instead the government offered the lease to Anawma, a venture led by Nay

Myo Say, a local artist who once ran a popular musical café. "The group has no conservation experience, no investors behind them, nothing!" says Thant. "The government's instincts are right, but their decisions aren't part of an overall cultural plan."

The YHT can point to some successful experiments. The Strand hotel has been renovated to its 1901 splendor, complete with a soaring ballroom and a butler on every level. In the old embassy district, the Governor's Residence hotel is in a restored timber mansion built in the '20s for Burmese officials visiting from the provinces. Today, you can sit in rattan chairs or play billiards in the bar, feeling like Maugham on a sultry afternoon. Meanwhile, the Rowe and Co. department store is currently being renovated by construction magnate—and reputed military crony—Zaw Zaw into a luxury hotel, and a Singapore-based company was given the go-ahead to renovate the former offices of the Burma Railways Company, dating from 1877, into five-star tourist lodging. And yet these efforts are mostly piecemeal.

"We need a vision for Yangon," Thant says, "a coherent business plan." At the moment, the colonial downtown, where there could be elegant promenades, boutiques, hotels and restaurants, is congested and claustrophobic. The waterfront of the Yangon River, fenced off by the government, should be reopened to the public. But Thant also wants the area to continue to accommodate its low-income residents, who populate the sidewalk tea stalls, giving the area its vibrancy.





"Do we want downtown to be a sanitized tourist zone, filled with shops for the rich, or do we want it to remain a living part of Rangoon itself?" he asks. Myanmar's tourism boom makes preservation potentially lucrative. "Even now, few in the government are aware that a properly renovated downtown would be a huge economic draw."

**S**PENDING TIME IN YANGON TODAY is almost as thrilling as it must have been in its '20s heyday, largely because the city is in the throes of revolutionary change. Since the easing of sanctions, international airlines have suddenly forged new routes. From New York, for example, I found myself hopping aboard one of the first air services from Doha in the Middle East to Yangon, on Qatar Airways, and rubbing shoulders with former U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Bill Richardson and his assistants. Richardson had campaigned to have Aung San Suu Kyi released in the '90s and was now on a soft diplomacy mission to see how reforms were progressing. ("Right now Myanmar is the hot, sexy country, and a real success story," he says. "But we have to pay attention. We can't just say, 'Best of luck!'" )

For travelers, Myanmar veers between the 21st century and the '60s. Yangon airport is a gleaming modern terminal but it lacks proper tower instruments, so our flight attempted two aborted landings in the late monsoonal fog. In its sprawling interior, most of the shops were deserted. Outside, dozens of broken-down vintage taxis were lined up, many with cracked windows and torn seats, but a woman named Tin Tin met me in a sleek new minivan. "Eight months ago, the trip from the airport was 35 minutes," she said, as traffic slowly ground to a halt. "Now it takes twice that long." A joke among local residents is that Hillary brought the traffic.

Once in the city, the infrastructure is just as shaky: Internet access is erratic, giving out at any moment; credit cards are not accepted except in a handful of top hotels, with heavy commissions; the first ATMs opened in Yangon in late 2011, but most do not accept foreign cards; travelers still have to bring wads of crisp U.S. dollar bills and change them in seedy offices for kyats, where any blemish causes them to be rejected. On one of my bills, Benjamin Franklin had the faintest crease in his face, so the exchange rate dropped five percent. "We accept only fresh cash," the attendant said, smiling. There are still no McDonald's or Levi's (although American companies are poised to rectify this situation). Still, the crumbling colonial backdrop makes any small signs of modernity appear all the more startling. While I was there, the first stretch limo in Yangon brought crowds of admirers, and three punk rockers in studded leather and lurid hairdos caused a sensation when they ambled down a shattered sidewalk.

Myanmar is such an exciting new destination that hotels are booked up several months in advance, especially in the luxury end of the market. "Our occupancy rates have more than doubled in the last year," gloats

Thomas Henseler, the German-born general manager of the Governor's Residence. "We don't really have a low season anymore." Out in the provinces, the travel system is overwhelmed, and the few high-end hotels cannot cope. "We need to employ someone just to say no to people begging for a room," jokes Yin Myo Su, who owns the elegant Inle Princess Resort in Inle Lake. Still, she tries to put the situation in perspective. "It seems like tourism is booming because the capacity in the country is so small. Our hotel has only 46 rooms. In total, there are 1,000 rooms in the whole area. That's the same as a single hotel in Las Vegas."

Nevertheless, the pace of change seems to have electrified the air in Yangon, creating a sense of heightened reality. Residents are intoxicated by the new freedom of speech. After chatting about politics, a common remark is: "Eight months ago I could not have said those words. We wouldn't be having this conversation!" There are now regular street demonstrations. One afternoon during my stay the streets were taken over by some 1,000 monks carrying umbrellas and placards. "After 50 years of suffocating, it's like we're in a ball of oxygen," explains Yin Myo Su.

With the relaxation of censorship, a new generation of Burmese artists is also coming out of the shadows.

One morning, I stopped by Studio Square, a gallery still hidden away in a nondescript commercial building. There was a party underway. A show by a young artist who calls himself NCS had finally been approved by censors—his third attempt in six years—and much of Yangon's art crowd was there to celebrate. His images were reworkings of old Burmese black-and-white film stills stamped with red logos of a vaguely political nature ("Brainwashed" or "Run as Much as You Can to Escape").

"Artists began to feel the change in early 2012," said NCS (his full name is Nyein Chan Su). "I wasn't worried about the censors this time. The Internet has changed everything. If they want to ban our work, we'll put it on Facebook. It's great publicity."

Yangon's nightlife is also opening up. While risqué nightclubs have been around for years, the first designer bars are now making an appearance. "I consider my work to be political," says the 29-year-old interior designer Mya Myitzu, who, after working for fashion and interior designer Kelly Wearstler in Los Angeles, returned to Yangon in 2011 and was hired as the designer for the new Bar One 4. "It's not just design, it's changing the mind-set." She is one of many Burmese expats returning to offer their support for the new Myanmar. "For my generation, there was always a feeling that if you got out, you would never come back," she says. "But that's changing quickly."

Westerners from almost every industry eager to tap into the opening market of 60 million potential consumers are also arriving in droves. The Friday night expat party at the Strand—a Yangon tradition for decades—has exploded into a networking frenzy, with entrepreneurs eagerly swapping business cards with trade delegates, consultants and diplomats.

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But an economist, who asks not to be named, cautions against rushing to Yangon and expecting to be embraced. “The Westerners have so missed the boat,” he says. “Where are the Burmese businessmen here tonight? They’re all with the Chinese and Koreans and Thais, as they have been for years. Western executives come to Yangon and say, ‘Great, I’ll go home and write a report.’ But Asians say, ‘We want to do business now, here’s the money, here’s what we want to do.’”

Moe Kyaw, a successful entrepreneur and member of the Chamber of Commerce for 20 years, is scathing about Western businessmen who assume they can make a fortune overnight. “Before you start talking about a gold rush in Myanmar, you have to remember that we’ve been doing business in this country—despite U.S. sanctions, EU sanctions and military dictatorships, with no bank loans, no credit cards—and we’ve been doing it for 20 years. Any treasure here was dug out years ago. Give us that respect. Now if you want to plant a seed in Myanmar, then yes, we’ll do business with you.”

**OUTSIDE YANGON**, any Western presence rapidly dissolves. Much of Myanmar remains off-limits to foreigners or requires special permits, most specifically in the areas where some of the country’s 135 ethnic groups are embroiled in violence. Travelers still tend to visit a handful of classic and relatively accessible destinations. But even here, the speed of change is threatening to damage fragile cultures and landscapes.

The ancient city of Bagan, the country’s most famous attraction, is reeling from decades of mismanagement under military rule. Over 2,500 abandoned temples and pagodas from an ancient Buddhist civilization rise above a plain 400 miles north of Yangon, the highest concentration of religious buildings in the world. But after a 1975 earthquake devastated many of the temples, the junta ordered heavy-handed repairs that were so clumsily done that UNESCO declined to grant it World Heritage status. In 1990, the military forcibly evacuated a large village from the site, resettling inhabitants in a dismal modern township. Since then, the archeological zone has been scarred by a 200-foot-high observation tower, golf course, paved highway, desolate museum and faux 11th-century palace.

But Myanmar’s new spirit of reform has arrived here as well. In early 2012, a notice was sent by the Ministry of Culture and Department of Archaeology to halt the controversial repair of pagodas. As a goodwill gesture, the director general of UNESCO, Irina Bokova, visited Bagan for the first time in August and indicated that Myanmar should renominate the site for World Heritage status. Foreign funds for conservation have

begun to trickle in again: In 2012, the Indian government gave \$2 million for the restoration of ancient frescos in the sprawling Ananda Pagoda.

Inle Lake, nestled in the central mountains of Myanmar, offers an exquisite snapshot of what could be lost in the rush to modernize. Its turquoise waters are dotted with villages on stilts, floating gardens and

ancient monasteries. Fishermen drift back and forth on canoes, moving their oars in a circular motion by the soles of their feet, as they have done for centuries. By chance, my visit coincided with an annual festival called Phaung Daw Oo Paya, where four golden Buddha statues are taken from village to village on a gilded barge and teams of villagers in silk costumes race in giant canoes to drumbeats and singing.

But as with so much else in Myanmar, there is more than meets the eye. “Inle Lake is an

environmental disaster waiting to happen,” says Arild Molstad, a Norwegian environmental consultant who specializes in sustainable tourism and has been visiting the lake for over a decade. “But people don’t realize it because it’s all going on below the surface.” The lake is dying from pollution, Molstad explains. Many villagers make a living from weaving, but the textile

“Westerners come to Yangon and say, ‘Great, I’ll go home and write a report.’ Asians say, ‘We want to do business now.’”



dyes they use are toxic and poisoning the ecosystem. Unregulated farming on the mountainsides is causing erosion, which is lowering water levels. The fish are smaller and fewer in number. Invasive weeds are clogging the waterways. “The patient hasn’t expired yet, but urgent attention is needed—or in 10 years things will be very, very hard to fix.” According to Molstad, Myanmar’s newfound popularity as a destination is both an opportunity and a threat. “If tourism isn’t managed properly, it will only add to the problems,” he says. “But if it is developed correctly, it can push employment in a more sustainable, organic direction. We’re really at a crossroads.”

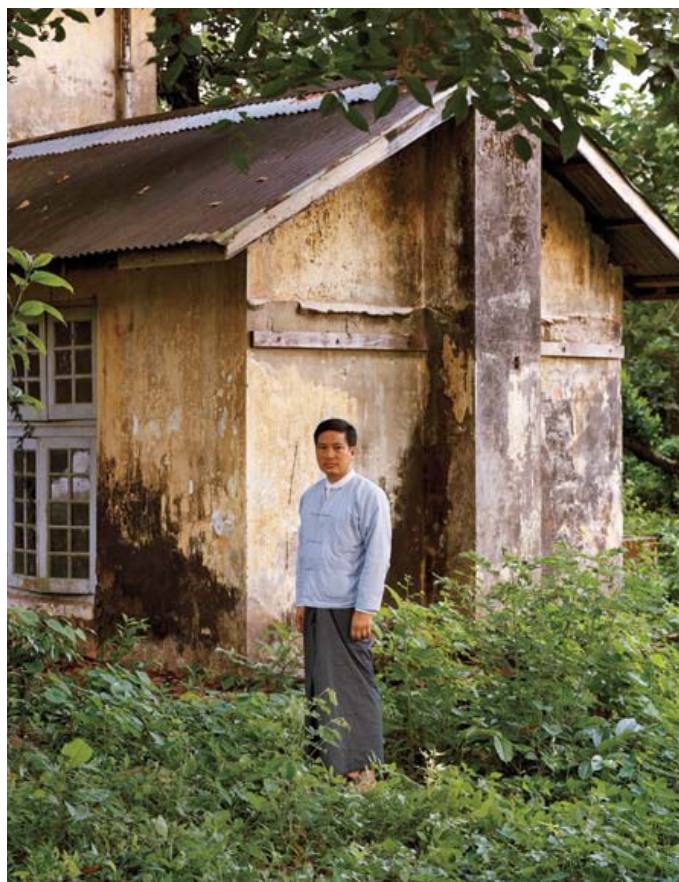
**B**ACK IN YANGON, Thant Myint-U and his supporters are grappling with the frustrating mirror-world of Myanmar’s government. Too many agencies have authority over historic buildings, creating a Kafkaesque maze of red tape. “There’s the chief minister of Yangon, the Ministry of Construction, the Ministry of Planning, the Ministry of Hotels and Tourism, the Ministry of Culture, the Myanmar Investment Commission,” says Thant. His plan to cut through the bureaucracy is to present a proposal directly to President Thein Sein. There have been positive signs. The government has announced that it will create a new business zone near Yangon airport for big chain hotels and office blocks, which, if it goes ahead, will ease the pressure of rising real estate prices in the downtown area. “We’re cautiously optimistic,” says architect Moe Moe Lwin. “At least the government now sees it would be a problem to knock everything down!”

While businesses are recognizing the potential of restoring colonial structures, they are still waiting for a clear sign from the government before committing. “The biggest obstacle for investors is that the prices are so high for both the land and the historic buildings,” says Ivan Pun of the SPA construction group. “As a result, nothing is being done. It simply doesn’t make economic sense for developers to come in. But if the government sells the structures at a reasonable price—or leases them—businesses will act.”

To get a glimpse of the future, I meet up with Nay Myo Say, the artist whose company has been offered the lease on the Secretariat. With long black hair and a crisp white shirt tucked into his *longyi*, he leads me back into the cavernous Victorian structure to explain his vision. “At first, I wanted to see the whole building turned into a giant museum,” he says. He proposed sections for Myanmar art, history and traditional clothing, and the room where Aung San was assassinated—currently an unrenovated shrine, the walls still covered in cheap linoleum—to be restored to its 1947 appearance. “But I was told that there has to be a commercial side to the project, or the whole thing will remain a dream.” After all, if the Secretariat did become a museum, it would be bigger

#### LOST HORIZON

Clockwise from opposite page: A fisherman at Inle Lake; a family-run bamboo business in Bagan; preservationist Thant Myint-U, at the crumbling former residence of his grandfather, U Thant, former secretary general of the United Nations.



than the Louvre. So he has been in discussions with Thant and the YHT to create a sensitive proposal to allow businesses—restaurants, cafés and offices—into parts of the space.

Finally, we clamored into a high ruined tower, which through broken windows offered sweeping views over Yangon. Parts of the skyline are already marred by a few shabby office blocks, providing a dispiriting glimpse of how the city might look if preservationists fail. It’s disturbing to imagine what has already been lost. The majestic old Government House, home of the British governors for decades, was leveled by the military in the ’80s without warning, as was Jubilee Hall, where John Gielgud played Hamlet in 1946, after the Japanese surrender. That morning, I had visited an elegant colonial mansion that has been turned into an art space, Gallery 65. It seemed a hopeful sign—except that the street had once been lined with similar beauties, all sold for massive profits and replaced by grimly efficient modern apartments.

“Yangon will still be a mess for the next five years,” Nay Myo Say predicts, as we trod gently downstairs. “In 10 or 15 years, I hope, it will be beautiful again.” We pause as two dogs lope across the hallway. “But it will be a challenge.” ♦