

## Crusade to save Yangon's heritage



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MYANMAR - As Myanmar sprints to catch up with its more developed South-east Asian neighbours, one man is in a different kind of race: to safeguard hundreds of precious colonial buildings in Yangon from the wrecking ball.

Historian and author Thant Myint-U, 48, is up against the tide of breathless development the country is experiencing since it opened its doors to the outside world after years of isolation and economic sanctions.

But in just two years since he set up his heritage advocacy organisation, Yangon Heritage Trust, Dr Thant and his colleagues have managed to save at least 50 buildings from demolition-happy developers ready to replace a century-old building with a cheap, no-character highrise that can fetch good rent.

"There is a growing and urgent need for residential and office space, there's money coming into the property market where you can imagine a huge threat to these heritage properties," said the American-born founder and chairman of Yangon Heritage Trust.

In town recently to give talks on Myanmar at the WongPartnership Leaders Forum 2014 and the Singapore Institute of International Affairs, he is the author of acclaimed books, *The River Of Lost Footsteps: A Personal History Of Burma* and *Where China Meets India: Burma And The New Crossroads Of Asia*, and a member of Myanmar's National Economic and Social Advisory Council.

Myanmar was under the British for 124 years and has one of the best and biggest collections of colonial buildings in Asia. Although woefully neglected, many still colour downtown Yangon today.

Upholding the city's architectural legacy was not a priority for the country's leaders, though they did have a list, compiled in the late 1990s, of 189 sites worthy of conservation. But not much has been done to them, and one was torn down by a property developer.

When the capital moved to Naypyidaw in 2005, the government also left a huge property portfolio, which ought to be managed by a single agency, said Dr Thant.

His vision for Yangon: a vibrant, green city boasting parks and an attractive waterfront, and an exciting cityscape with a mix of old and new; of beautifully restored heritage houses and gleaming modern buildings.

This will prove valuable in future, perhaps 15 years from now, when Myanmar becomes a middle-income country and needs to attract talent and foster creative industries.

"Then all of a sudden, having a downtown area where you can walk around, have bookstores and cafes and amazing architecture that no one else has, will be an enormous asset and we'll regret having destroyed that if we don't protect them now," Dr Thant said.

Born in New York City and educated at Harvard and Cambridge, where he earned his PhD in history, he first went to Myanmar at the age of eight and spent his teenage years there until he went to university. About four years ago, he made Yangon his base.

"I realised one day two years ago that my grandfather's old house was still around and I had never seen it. I found it amid an overgrown area, in complete ruin with the roof caved in, and there were snakes in the garden."

The next day, he wrote a letter to President Thein Sein to ask if his family could raise private money to restore the house and turn it into a museum and public event space. The President replied the day after to say "yes".

About US\$100,000 (S\$126,000) was raised and the house, U Thant House, is now a lovingly restored bungalow dedicated to the memory of his maternal grandfather, the former United Nations secretary-general.

There are a lot more houses in that area, known as Windermere, once homes to government ministers and senior officials, now left abandoned.

"At a time where houses are rented for US\$20,000 to US\$30,000 a month, there are a lot of these empty houses which are state property. It's a matter of connecting the demand and supply. You take a house like this, and US\$100,000 is not a lot of money, and it's restored nicely. There are lots of homes like that, that can be done," said Dr Thant.

The challenges in this crusade for conservation in Yangon are not so much structural or financial, but social and legal ones. "How do we come up with the right set of solutions that will not just protect and restore these buildings, but will keep the special character of Downtown Yangon and keep some of these communities intact?"

Many of the properties are also in private hands, and often with contested ownership, and that makes the job of restoration more difficult.

A conservation agenda needs to fit into a broader urban planning framework, said Dr Thant, whose organisation helped draft the country's first urban conservation Bill, which will hopefully be passed in the coming months.

Yangon Heritage Trust also helped put together a zoning plan which sets height limits within downtown and the famed Shwedagon Pagoda area.

Dr Thant's team has put together an inventory of more than 4,000 buildings worth protecting, half of which are from the pre-1960s era. Also in the pipeline is a study to understand the economy and livelihood in Downtown Yangon.

Crucial to the cause is getting public support for it, and Yangon Heritage Trust's outreach plans include conducting heritage tours, putting up plaques at historic buildings and a show-and-tell of what a future Yangon could look like.

"There is this sense that people support all this change happening, the opening of the economy, investment coming in, but they are also anxious and don't want everything to change overnight," he said.

"People want, first and foremost, a working kitchen, a proper bathroom, but then if they know they can have that, and still have the old city they grew up in, this is something they want."

To show them that it is possible, he is raising money to restore two to three residential buildings for free.

"If we can start with these basic projects, we will also start the conversation."

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