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Yangon, Myanmar at a Turning Point:

*The intersection of housing rights and
historic preservation in the historic center*

Fall, 2014 Studio in Yangon (Rangoon), Myanmar (Burma)
FAYERWEATHER 201
Tuesdays, 9:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m.

WORKPLAN

Studio Description:

This studio, organized in conjunction with the Yangon Heritage Trust (YHT) in Yangon, Myanmar, as client, will assist YHT in thinking through the issues it faces in devising and implementing a comprehensive plan for the preservation and restoration of the historic colonial and pre-colonial center of the city while, at the same time, preserving and protecting the rights of the low-income residents of the downtown community. Additional partners in the project will be the Law Department of Yangon University and the Center for the Study of Human Rights at Columbia.

Myanmar is going through a period of rapid social, economic and political change. After more than 60 years of military dictatorship, the country's leadership has, over the past couple of years, been moving toward a more democratic society: lifting censorship, releasing political prisoners and creating new laws, institutions and policies that have been opening new avenues of discourse and public participation. International economic sanctions against Myanmar have, for the most part, been lifted, and international investment is pouring into the country. The city's center has suffered from decades of neglect, but between lack of development and international sanctions, much of the original colonial and pre-colonial architecture remains relatively intact. YHT is a fairly new NGO with government, international and foundation funding that is dedicated to restoring and preserving the severely

decayed historic center of the city of Yangon. Thus far, YHT has been cataloguing the buildings in the city's center that have architectural and historic value. YHT has obtained an agreement from the government to place a temporary moratorium on demolitions in a designated area of the city's center. Most buildings in the area are severely deteriorated. Current residents of most of the downtown buildings are extremely poor – most live in buildings that were intended for residential use, others live in buildings that were originally designed for commercial use.

YHT would like, in the long run, to preserve and restore buildings of aesthetic and historic value while respecting the residency rights of current residents. To do so, they will have to navigate the tensions that will inevitably arise between the needs of the current residents to remain in their homes and communities and the displacement pressure that will be generated by the physical work of restoration as well as the market pressures that are already driving up real estate values and that will only increase as the physical and aesthetic condition of the area improves.

The work of the studio will involve looking at the Myanmar planning and legal infrastructure (and lack of infrastructure) that relates to the intersection of housing rights and historic preservation, looking at how several other countries have addressed similar issues, and developing a set of recommendations for appropriate planning, legal and policy measures. In addition, GSAPP students will be paired with Burmese law students to interview some local residents to understand the issues on an individual level and to gather information that will inform the recommendations.

Studio Roadmap:

Phase 1: (September)

During the first phase of the studio, students will gain background knowledge that will provide context for the project. They will also begin preparations for developing the late October symposium presentation in Yangon and the final report.

goals:

- gain background understanding of Burma – its history, politics, culture and existing legal and policy measures that affect the intersection of housing rights and historic preservation
- gain background understanding of downtown Yangon, its architecture, history, development dynamics
- gain background understanding of the client, Yangon Heritage Trust, its mission, goals, activities
- gain background understanding of the intersection of heritage preservation and human rights in general and particularly with respect to the right to housing
- gain background understanding of the phenomenon of gentrification in general

- begin work on case studies of other cities and on recommendations

activities:

- undertake literature review and develop annotated bibliography – all students
- complete IRB training
- choose case study sites of 3-4 different locations in the world; possible case study sites include:
 - Cairo
 - Harlem
 - Havana Vieja
 - Beirut
 - Georgetown, Penang
- determine taxonomy of issues to be investigated and framework for case study research
- working groups develop case studies
- preliminary draft of interview questions

Phase 2: late September – late October:

During the second phase of the studio, students will complete their case studies, develop their preliminary recommendations, prepare their presentations for the symposium in Yangon and finalize the interview questionnaire.

goals:

- complete case studies in writing as draft for final report and for presentation in Yangon
- develop preliminary recommendations to YHT in writing and for presentation
- develop interview template for community interviews in Yangon
- gain Columbia approval/certification for research as needed

activities:

- in-class studio presentations of case studies for feedback and revision
- in-class studio presentations of preliminary recommendations to YHT
- revision/refinement of recommendations
- preparation for on-the-ground activities
- in-class presentations on and finalization of interview template
- Harlem walking tour – intersection of historic preservation and housing rights issues

Phase 3: Site Visit to Yangon, Late October

- entrance meeting with YHT

- tour of historic downtown
- community interviews, along with YU law students
- symposium for YHT (and others? YU? YCDC?) on student case studies and recommendations; solicit questions and feedback
- exit meeting with YHT

Phase 4: November/December:

- Revise, finalize and transmit written report for YHT
- Prepare and present studio for GSAPP

Recommended:

Note that these readings and films are supplementary to the assigned readings and activities. You are encouraged to read and view at least some of these works to broaden your understanding of Burma/Myanmar

Books:

Karen Connolly, The Lizard Cage (2008) – novel about a Burmese political prisoner

Amitav Ghosh, The Glass Palace (2002) – novel about Burmese during the British colonial period

George Orwell, Burmese Days (1934) – novel about British colonials in Burma

Thant Myint-U, Where China Meets India: Burma and the New Crossroads of Asia (2012) – nonfiction about Burma and geopolitics (Thant Myint-U is the President of the Yangon Heritage Trust)

Thant Myint-U, The River of Lost Footsteps (2008) - A personal history of Burma

Emma Larkin, Finding George Orwell in Burma (2006) - George Orwell lived and worked in Burma during colonial era and wrote the famous 1984 dystopia. Emma Larkin finds it through her travels.

Aung San Suu Kyi, Freedom from Fear and other writings

Aung San Suu Kyi, Letters from Burma - ASSK talks about her campaign struggles in the 1990s

Inge Sargent, Twilight Over Burma (My life as a Shan Princess) - An Austrian met a Shan Prince in Colorado and went back to Burma without knowing his status. She endured the turbulence in Burma.

Patricia Elliott, White Umbrella - Born into royalty, sold in marriage, a Shan princess fought against tradition, foreign invaders and the brute power of a crazed general. Her journey from Princess, to Member of Parliament, rebel leader, to exile is an inspiration and a revelation - about Burma.

Films:

Burma VJ: Reporting from a Closed Country (2008), about 2007 saffron uprising.

Luc Besson, *The Lady* (2011), bio-pic of Aung San Suu Kyi

John Boorman, *Beyond Rangoon* (1995) – American woman gets caught up in Burmese political turmoil