

## **Heritage Conservation and Asian Urban Modernity: Reconfiguring Yangon**

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### **Abstract**

The nascent Yangon preservation movement poses a radical paradigmatic shift in perceptions of history, national identity, and Asian urban modernity. It accomplishes this through generating public debates regarding what constitutes Yangon heritage as it exists or is remembered in the built environment. This seemingly circumscribed architectural concern reconfigures the ideational and physical contours of imposed and indigenous pasts, claims to global modernity, and realms of public space. In invoking cosmopolitan identities and the proposal of secular heritage the movement is inclusive and therefore in distinct contrast to: previous national government led initiatives whose primary objective was the legitimization of power through links with Buddhism and a monarchical past; or similarly, the colonial project in its production of antiquity to distance legitimate indigenous authority. While former efforts were focused on the past to solidify the conditions of rule and to assert a homogenous national identity, today's Yangon heritage movement is focused on the future and is rooted in beliefs of pluralism and the vitality of heterogeneity. This perspectival reorientation raises a panoply of critical issues from governance and representation, to new concepts of public good and the communal self. Urban heritage and its conservation are at the nexus of these socio-physical transformations. In Yangon, unlike its regional urban counterparts, heritage is being mobilized in devising long-term strategic urban development plans. While no single city can ever represent the contexts, challenges, or conditions of cities globally, Yangon presents some of the most pressing issues of contemporary urban society particularly where rapid urbanization is most intense - the Asian global south - and illustrates the growing centrality of heritage in the discursive and material formation of the city and its citizens. This paper suggests that what is occurring in Yangon is of transdisciplinary interest at multiple scales.