



First the good news. Then the bad. Then the good news again. The good news is that Burma, the Southeast Asian nation that was closed to the outside world for decades, is now opening up. The bad news is that its heritage structures, mainly in the commercial capital of Downtown Yangon, are in danger of becoming victim to the wrecking ball as development frenzy seizes the country. The good news once again is that the Burmese government and heritage specialists are taking steps to preserve the structures.

Meet documentary photographers Moroccan-born Australian Jacques Maudy and Italian Jimi Casaccia. They have made it their mission to record through images, the epic saga of British colonial buildings in Yangon, which have withstood the vicissitudes of time, the agonies of climate change, the perils of political turmoil but are now perhaps helpless in the face of globalisation, the race for modernisation and the intentions of developers.

Maudy and Casaccia recall the words that set them off on their journey. "There's no trace of Hong Kong's colonial past left in the city's architecture — it's all been torn down. The city has lost its historical architectural identity. Don't let that happen to Yangon!"

These warnings came from a range of experts who attended the recent Yangon Heritage Trust's (YHT) international conference. The YHT had put out a call out for help to save Yangon's colonial buildings, and Maudy and Casaccia felt compelled to respond.

The result is a stunning body of images of these buildings, soon to be published in a glossy high-quality publication titled *Yangon, a City to Rescue*. Yangon is a city on the cusp of rapid growth and change. It's a place where fast-built sharp, modern buildings are sprouting-up quickly, answering the call of globalisation. But there's no crowding-out the stunning and intact architectural jewels that help tell the story of Burma's colonial past.

"Wander down just about any street in the city of six million people and you'll see them — from apartment buildings, to dramatic public structures," the photographers say. Until now, Burma's relative isolation from the rest of the globe had vicariously helped to preserve these stunning examples of grander times in the country's history. But now, as the government makes tentative steps towards democracy, there's a rush of economic interest in Burma from the outside world that almost threatens to overwhelm the country.

It's a state of affairs that's also echoed in the fate of the city's colonial buildings, many of which have already been demolished because of their poor state of repair, or to simply make way for the new. It didn't take any convincing for Maudy and Casaccia to volunteer to help the YHT tell the story of Burma's proud past.

Working just before the onset of Burma's dramatic monsoon season, they managed to capture vivid images of Yangon's colonial buildings in a way that's never been seen before. The resulting images give the outside world a tantalising glimpse of a fascinating country and its proud people,

who, like their city, are also experiencing a rapid rate of change.

It is safe to say that Maudy and Casaccia have documented Yangon's colonial buildings in the most comprehensive suite of awe-inspiring images that have ever been produced of Yangon's colonial buildings. Their photographs allow the majesty of these buildings to speak for themselves, and are so vital you'll literally gasp at the majestic height buildings, like the High Court.

You'll marvel too at the majesty of the historic Secretariat building — the main seat of government in Burma until quite recently. Few civilians have ever been allowed inside this stunning building since the assassination of General Aung San — Aung San Sui Kyi's father.

The photographs have already generated a huge amount of excitement when they were exhibited on the walls of Yangon's historic Strand Hotel during the May/June YHT international conference. These images also helped in part to draw the government's atten-



Secretariat staircase

tion to the vast architectural wealth that it possesses. As the conference concluded, the government announced that it would withdraw demolition permits on a number of historic buildings in the city while the Trust mapped the city's most important buildings that must be saved.

Downtown Yangon is known for its leafy avenues and fin-de-siècle architecture. The former British colonial capital has the highest number of colonial period buildings in Southeast Asia. It is still mainly made up of decaying colonial buildings. The former High Court, the former Secretariat buildings, the former St Paul's English High School, the Strand Hotel where George Orwell once stayed and the Pegu Hotel where Rudyard Kipling spent an inspirational night and wrote *Mandalay*, are excellent examples of the bygone era.

Wiki notes that most downtown buildings from this era are four-story mix-use (residential and commercial)

buildings with 14-foot (4.3 m) ceilings, allowing for the construction of mezzanines. Despite their less-than-perfect conditions, the buildings remain highly sought after and most expensive in the city's property market.

In 1996, the Yangon City Development Committee created a Yangon City Heritage List of old buildings and structures in the city that cannot be modified or torn down without approval. In 2012, the city of Yangon imposed a 50-year moratorium on demolition of buildings older than 50 years. The Yangon Heritage Trust, an NGO started by Thant Myint-U, aims to create heritage areas in Downtown, and attract investors to renovate buildings for commercial use.

Myint-U is a historian, a past Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge and the founder and chairman of the Yangon Heritage Trust. He is also the author of two bestselling and critically acclaimed books, *The River of Lost Footsteps: A Personal History of Burma* and *Where China Meets India: Burma and the New Crossroads of Asia*. He is the grandson of former UN Secretary-General U Thant.

The architectural gems, though decaying, can be said to be perfect examples of 18th century British design. The architects, though influenced by local climate and mores, were loath to let go of homeland memories, with the result that the buildings are an eclectic mix of British and Oriental designs. Something similar happened in India, where Mughal and British motifs were mixed to form the Indo-Saracenic school of architecture.

Maudy's and Casaccia's photographs bring out in dramatic fashion the imperious majesty of the mostly red-brick buildings. They seem like dowagers, still tenaciously holding on to the last vestiges of their former heralded beauty! Their facades might be full of peeling paint, their turrets might have weeds growing on them and they might desperately need a coat — or many coats — of paint. But there's no denying their superb craftsmanship and solidity.

The Lonely Planet (LP) quotes Kipling on Burma — and then adds its own tart observations to the Nobel Laureate's words. "This is Burma," wrote Rudyard Kipling. "It is quite unlike any place you know about."

"How right he was: more than a century later Myanmar remains a world apart," says LP. "To travel here is to encounter men wearing skirt-like *longyi*, women smothered in *thanakha* (traditional make-up) and betel-chewing grannies with mouths full of blood-red juice — and that's just at the airport! One of the most fascinating aspects of travel in Myanmar (Burma) is the opportunity to experience a corner of Asia that, in many ways, has changed little since British colonial times. Myanmar, for instance, has yet to be completely overwhelmed by Western clothing. It's also a country of many incredible and sometimes surreal sites."

Take Maudy's and Casaccia's word for it: some of them are awaiting you just around the corner in Downtown Yangon.