

## **Excursion: Downtown and Urban Fringe of Megacity Yangon**

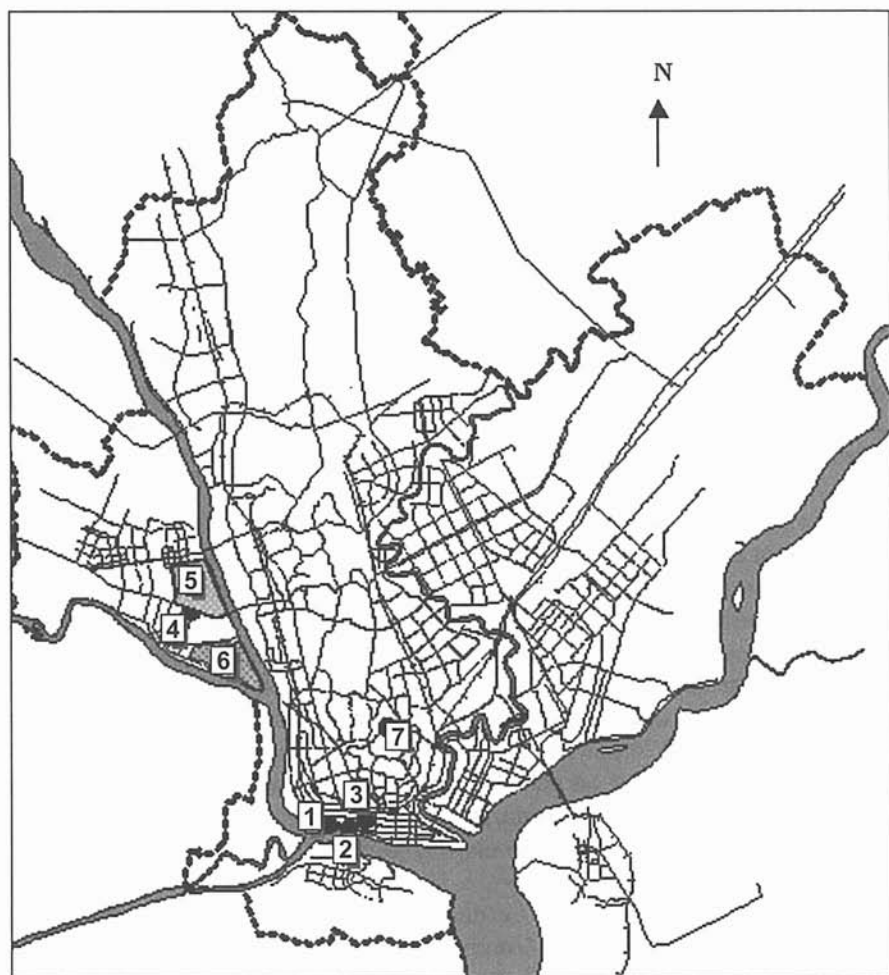
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According to an UN report, the percentage of urban population is increasing from 29.8% in 1950 to 47.2% in 2000. The projection shows that it will increase up to 60.2% in 2030 (Kraas 2005: 31). The fastest rate of increase in urban population is found in cities of developing countries, especially in Asia (UN 2002).

Through the publication of "Our Common future" by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) in 1987, the term 'sustainable development', meaning "meeting the need of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own need", has increasingly applied. Although it is quite vague in meaning, the term has no real drawback because the powerful idea underlying this concept is that of intergenerational equity. Later this became a central aim in any development aspect which also extended to urban areas as 'sustainable cities' or 'urban sustainability'. As the actual achievement for sustainable development will be specific to local conditions and possibilities, such focus on urban areas is most desirable because the world's urban population is increasing especially in cities of developing countries.

The accepted population figure for defining a 'megacity' varies from between 5 million and 8 million, between 8 and 10, to 10 million and above. According to this, there are 39, 24 and 16 megacities in the world at present, and two thirds of the megacities are now in developing countries, mostly concentrated in South and East Asia. Thus, it is appropriate to emphasize sustainable development in these megacities, especially in developing countries.

Yangon with a population of more than five million in 2005 is a large social structure which passed through a long history to its present spatial and economic structure, producing its own unique urban functions and processes. Against this background, a two-day-field excursion after the workshop was made with the aim to understand the processes and pattern of the Megacity Yangon, to enhance the adaptive strategy in urban planning towards sustainable urban development of Yangon as it has the highest potential to become a unique city in Southeast Asia and to point out this reality. Figure 1 shows the excursion points that were visited on two days.



*Fig. 1: Distribution of Chinese shophouses within Downtown Yangon*  
1: Starting point at Yangon Harbour, 2: Chinese Temple, 3: Theingyi Market,  
4: Hlaingthayar Industrial Zone Management Office, 5: FMI Garden City,  
6: Pun Hlaing Golf Estate, 7: Chaukhtatgyi Pagoda

## **Day 1: Downtown of Yangon City: A unique urban heritage**

(Conducted by Daw Hlaing Maw Oo and Daw Moe Moe Hlaing Myint of DHSHD on 23 June 2005).

Yangon City is the result of interrelationships between its society, defined by a particular cultural, economic and political structure and its physical landscape. The aggregates of all these various facets can be found throughout Yangon City,

creating their own functions and processes which create its own uniqueness, which in turn need to be considered in a sustainability context. The immediate need for this is to identify and select a proper way to utilize the strength of such diversity and uniqueness. On this background, the first day excursion was focused on the downtown area of Yangon to understand its uniqueness.

### **The Yangon Harbour: Origin of the Megacity Yangon**

The day started with the old harbour. The main purpose of choosing this harbour is to show the original starting point of Yangon as a small fishing village and how it evolved to present stage, and to show how an old port was still functioning with its old structure. Most important is to point out the fact that this area should be considered as an urban heritage place of Yangon City.

Yangon was known as a small fishing village called 'Dagon' under the Mon regime until mid 18th century. In May 1755 a mark in the history of Yangon was made by King Alaungphaya, who occupied the whole lower Myanmar and changed this small village into a port town. Its value as a port started with three wooden jetties. The largest was the King's wharf, which was at the place of the present Pansodan jetty. There were two large wooden buildings used as store-houses nearby this jetty.

The first Anglo-Myanmar War broke out in 1824 and British occupied the Tanintharyi and Rakhine coastal areas. After this war, heavy taxes were levied on Yangon port due to war indemnity. Thus, immediately after this war, trade and commerce shifted to British owned ports because they were tax free. As such, *Mawlamying* became a principal port at that time.

The second Anglo-Myanmar war broke out in 1852 and the British occupied lower Myanmar, and Yangon came under British rule. Since then, Yangon harbour has become important again for commerce and trade because of the great waterway to the *Ayeyarwady* delta, which was a large hinterland for Yangon.

After the end of Third Anglo-Myanmar War in 1885, the whole country came under British rule. Soon after this, Yangon became the capital city of Myanmar and trade and commerce gradually developed due to its locational advantages in transport. Before the Second World War, especially during the 1930s, about 5 million tons of sea-borne trade was handled by this harbour annually. During the Second World War period, the port stagnated. In 1945, it could only export 5% of its pre-war capacity. In 1948 Myanmar regained independence.

After 1960, under the government of the Revolutionary Council, with the help of the Asian Development Bank (ADB), Hteedan Coal wharf in Kyeemyindine Township was built. This was connected to Sule Pagoda wharves. After 1988, the

government had repaired all the wharves. In 1991-1992, Yangon Port handled 1.45 million tons of international freight.

Nowadays, this port is under multifunctional use. Under the Port of Yangon there are 13 international berths and more than 40 jetties which are mainly pontoon type, floating ones, mainly for domestic traffic. From Ayeyarwady Division alone, more than 1.4 million passengers and 58000 tons of cargo pass through this harbour per month. Besides, rice for the whole city is imported mainly from Ayeyarwady Division through this port, having the character of a node between rural and urban linkages. Pansondan Jetty is mainly used for ferries commuting with Dalla Township, which is located at the southern bank of Yangon River as there is no bridge for road transport. There are more than 10000 daily commuters, especially government servicemen, small traders of fresh fruits and vegetable commuting through this harbour. As the cost of living and land prices are very low, some government and other workers work at Yangon and live in Dala Township. Foreign going vessels mainly use Sule Pagoda wharves and Bo Aung Kyaw wharves especially for container handling. Ocean going vessels, especially from Singapore, Malaysia, China, India, Bangladesh, South Korea and Japan use these jetties. Another aspect relating to this harbour is that more than 1500 hard-workers and more than 100 hawkers rely on this harbour for their daily survival.

This old harbour of Yangon has its own functions and processes with strong rural-urban linkages, serving as a door of importing the staple food, rice for 5.5 millions people. Although many motor roads have been constructed in Ayeyarwady Division, this harbour will continue to play its role as a major door to Yangon.

From the urban heritage point of view, this harbour can be regarded as both a natural and man made physical element, because it is a river front, having historical value and structural uniqueness because of old buildings and old port facilities as well as the number of users. Since this harbour place is fulfilling the need of people with a unique structure, it should be considered as a place which is worth to conserve as functional heritage site of Yangon City; it is, furthermore, a good point to reflect upon sustainable development.

### **The Chinese Temple and so-called Chinatown**

Yangon has a distinct character in clustering of living quarters which is most obvious in downtown. According to this cluster pattern, the main types of business and functional situation also differ. The most prominent one is the Chinese living quarters, commonly called "Chinatown". However, it is not an enclosed part and it can be regarded only as a Chinese living quarter where Chinese people are living in their traditional living style. This distinct Chinese cluster is mainly found between 13th Street and Shwedagon Pagoda Road, and between Anawrahta Road and Strand Road. Figure 2 shows the distribution of Chinese shop houses

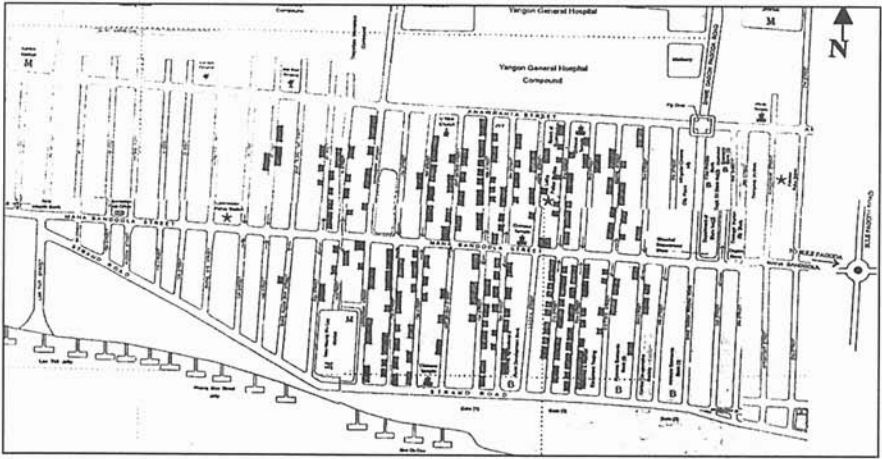


Fig. 2: Distribution of Chinese shophouses within Downtown Yangon (Source: DHSHD 2005)

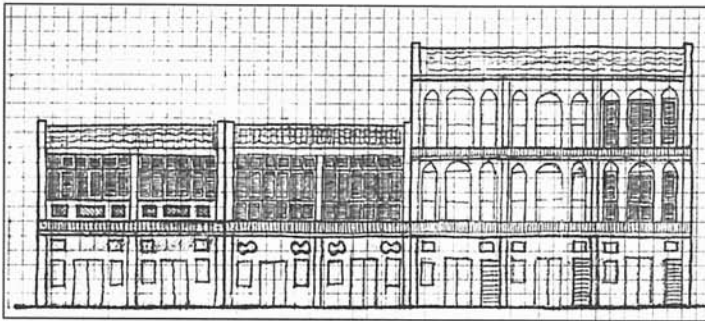


Fig. 3: Architectural style of Chinese shophouses in Downtown Yangon City (Source: DHSHD 2005)

within the downtown area and figure 3 shows the typical architectural style of Chinese shophouses. These houses still exist in the downtown area to a certain extent. However, these rows of low houses (mainly two stories, Fig. 4) are endangered by private construction companies, for this area has the highest land prices in Yangon City, and the economic return is great if they can be replaced with higher-storey buildings, namely of the Hong Kong type with usually eight floors.



Fig. 4: Typical low house in Downtown Yangon City - A typical Chinese window style at 19th Street





















