

By **LOW SHI PING** in Yangon
For *China Daily Asia Weekly*

The Steel Brothers was a British conglomerate that operated in Myanmar in the late 1800s, involved in areas including forestry, mining, oil and agriculture.

It did so well it built itself a headquarters in Yangon, along Bo Sun Pat Street, in the 1870s.

Almost 150 years later, that same building — now part of the city's heritage — has been painstakingly restored and adapted to become the 74-room Yangon Excelsior boutique hotel.

Opened in July, the building has a cleaned-up facade that is gleaming white. Inside, the past melds beautifully with the present, with stuccoed decorations framing contemporary design elements, plush furniture and funky light fittings.

The Yangon Excelsior is a wonderful example of how colonial era heritage buildings throughout Myanmar's largest city and former capital can be restored.

And there are many such buildings — in excess of 2,000 in the six townships that make up Yangon's downtown.

One of the largest is the grandiose Secretariat. The Victorian-style building was once the home and administrative seat of British Burma. It later gained notoriety as the place where independence hero General Aung San — father of Myanmar's current civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi — was assassinated in 1947, alongside six ministers.

Along the riverfront stands the sizable Small Claims Court, built in 1931, currently being converted into another hotel, to be managed by Rosewood Hotels & Resorts.

But there are also smaller buildings owned by the locals and individual shophouses standing alongside each other, forming row after row in the city.

Unfortunately, rather than viewing the buildings as unpolished gems, developers have been eager to demolish these to build new, oftentimes characterless structures in their place.

The primary reason is cost — it is better for the bottom line to demolish and construct from scratch, rather than undertake a restoration process.

The time may be ripe for a rethink.

“By preserving a heritage building, we are not only saving the physical structure of a building, but also conserving a historical and cultural identity of a city, a social character of a neighborhood, and the sense of pride and ownership of a family,” said South African national Mark Horton, director of restoration at Doh Eain, a Yangon-based social enterprise.

“Moreover, historic buildings have an attraction for (the) thriving of small businesses and tourists — contributing to (the) local economy,” he said.

Doh Eain helps private, small heritage building owners restore their

Yangon restoration reflects new vision

Heritage trust and social enterprise work to preserve historic buildings, conserving the identity of Myanmar's largest city



The Victorian-style Secretariat building in downtown Yangon was once the administrative seat of British Burma.

PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY ASIA WEEKLY



Artists from Doh Eain, a Yangon-based social enterprise, paint an alleyway. Doh Eain helps convert back lanes into neighborhood spaces where children can play, and people can sit outside and relax.

properties to the original condition. In doing so, the company helps to raise their value, enabling them to be rented out at a higher price.

One example is a house on 47th Street in downtown Yangon. Led by Horton, it underwent a significant change, including a new set of windows and repositioned mezzanines in the original building to allow in maximum natural light.

Doh Eain also has what it calls “alleyway projects”; converting back lanes more commonly used as gar-

bage dumps into valuable neighborhood spaces where children can play, and people can sit outside and relax.

Founder Emilie Roell, a Dutchwoman who has been living in Myanmar for the past five years, said: “We work on conservation and urban regeneration directly with and for the residents of Yangon, delivering user-centered design and restoration/construction projects that preserve and improve historical, cultural, natural and social assets.”

Fortunately, Doh Eain, which

launched in 2015, is not the only voice in this growing chorus that encourages the preservation of Yangon's built environment.

An important advocacy group in the city is the Yangon Heritage Trust (YHT), which has a vision of making Yangon one of Asia's most livable cities.

Director of the trust, Daw Moe Moe Lwin, said YHT hopes to combine heritage with urban planning to create a better future for the city.

“It is more than just saving colonial architecture. It is about advocating that in the process of urban development, heritage buildings need to be emphasized,” she said.

“How do we integrate everything within planning, design and urban solutions? We spend a lot of time giving advice to the government and decision-makers to create policies on saving our urban heritage.”

In addition, YHT oversees urban heritage projects, provides advice on renovation, supports the technical training needed to execute these projects, and does public outreach work, such as organizing walking tours and street festivals to raise awareness.

While the 6-year-old YHT cannot boast any qualitative successes to date, Daw Moe Moe Lwin said the

heritage real estate market is stable, despite property prices declining in general.

Needless to say, challenges are plentiful, chief of which is development and economic progress. This, coupled with the lack of a legal framework to protect the built heritage, poses a major threat.

“We need to have statutory listing and strong protection measures,” she said. “The new government is trying to manage development, so there is hope. These are assets we have and can be easily lost if no attention is given.”

Horton, Doh Eain's director of restoration, shared another challenge — the lack of skilled labor. Much of the know-how of conservation and restoration is passed down between generations, but it is hard to find these families because the sector is so informal.

There is also the need for greater coordination and communication between organizations.

At the municipal level, the Yangon City Development Committee (YCDC) has its own list of major, important heritage buildings.

This, Horton said, does not match exactly with YHT's, which is currently being compiled and comprises mainly small- and medium-scale buildings.

“If their lists don't match, you end up with something that happened right across from our office. A beautiful heritage building over 100 years old, on YHT's list but not on YCDC's list, was demolished,” revealed Horton.

As someone who cycles around the city a lot, Horton said he becomes more “anxious”, as he can see there is so much more to be done.

Horton admitted that things have improved from when he first arrived in 2014, thanks to factors like the YCDC setting up a heritage committee.

“It is clear that the government now understands its importance,” he said. “If there is a demolition proposal, it speaks to YHT for their advice, which they did not do before. They get it now.”

As a trained architect herself, Daw Moe Moe Lwin is aware that heritage should not get in the way of development, but should not be sidelined either.

“To be a livable city, you need to link with the past, as well as (know) how to improve the quality of your urban environment. This means having quality architecture from the past, and new quality architecture.

“We are also interested in making the urban surroundings comfortable with transportation networks and making the city more walkable.”

She revealed that she has noticed the younger generation developing an interest in Yangon's heritage. “We are seeing more master's students doing research relating to this topic.”

Ultimately, she hopes that heritage will become part of the planning vision and system.

“There are actually a lot of opportunities to capitalize. You just need to take them.”