

Yangon might be Asia's most architecturally intriguing urban area – and a new wave of luxury hotels is aiming to preserve that heritage

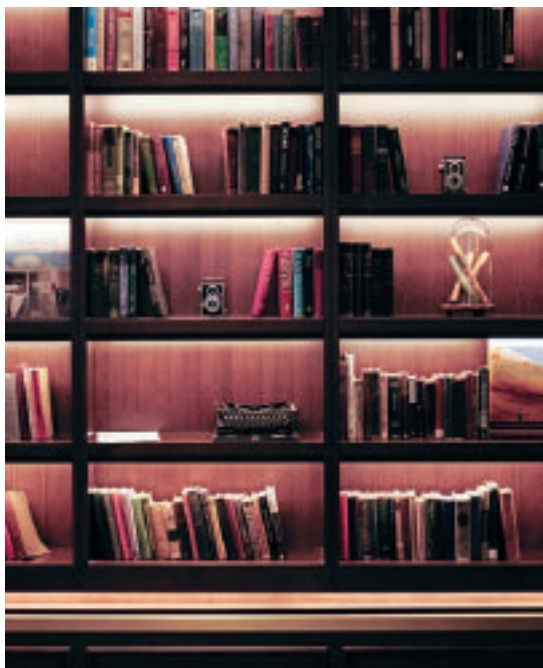
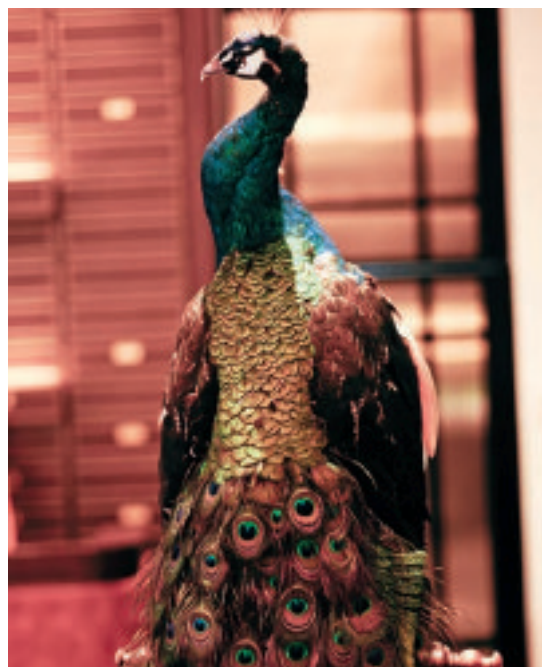
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# IF THESE WALLS COULD TALK









rand, crumbling buildings with ornately fenestrated, moss-dabbed, pastel façades flank the streets of downtown Yangon. These colourful structures saturate the former capital of Myanmar – which is believed to have the highest concentration of colonial-era buildings on the continent – with secrets and mystery.

Many of these structures, built during the 1824–1948 British rule of the country (then called Burma), are inhabited by locals enjoying leafy balcony views. Street vendors in ankle-brushing skirts sell brass statues beneath their ground floor arches. Older gentlemen drag heavy typewriters to the street from their dark corridors, tapping away on wobbly tables before rain blasts send them hurriedly back inside.

Many others are empty and in disrepair, looking more likely to be hit with wrecking balls than renovated. Indeed, the Yangon authorities spend little on the buildings that help to make this city of 5.2 million people so unique. The only current major publicly-funded renovation project of a colonial-era Yangon building is the striking, red-and-yellow-painted Ministers' Building, a former government office set to become a library next year.

Instead – encouraged by the Yangon Heritage Trust (YHT), which has been promoting building preservation since its formation in 2012 – the private sector has stepped in. Since the National League for

Democracy's 2015 Myanmar election win stimulated foreign investment in Yangon, a spate of new cafés and restaurants has taken over previously condemned buildings. Along with sushi and frappés, they have brought cash to protect their new homes.

Earlier this year, the newest chapter in this heritage story began when the ribbon was cut on the Yangon Excelsior: a luxury boutique hotel built on a downtown site dating back to the 1870s, which during colonial times was owned by the British Steel Brothers trading company. Existing architectural elements, such as huge black steel beams and a lift shaft, were incorporated into the hotel's sleek, white-dominated modern design. By keeping these elements, the owners say they are helping to bring Yangon's rich heritage to the wider public and saving property that might otherwise become rubble.

The Yangon Excelsior will soon be joined by the city's new Rosewood hotel, another luxury hotel which is taking over the enormous New Law Courts building a few blocks east of the Excelsior. This new wave of high-end accommodation will be completed by the Peninsular, housed in the huge former Myanmar Railway Company headquarters and is expected to open in 2021.

Renovating the Excelsior, which is located on the atmospheric tea-stall-lined Bo Sun Pat Street, was a process of discovery. Black-and-white photos in

*Previous page:*  
The façade of the Rosewood Hotel is made up of 22 marble Ionic columns

*Opposite:*  
The interior of the Excelsior is rich in historical details that celebrate the city's past





## “When a project has such a strong history it’s more poetic and romantic than doing a new development”

the hotel show Steel Brothers workers beaver away in an expansive atrium, which was later covered up by ceiling layers during renovation. “The builders kept uncovering old structures we didn’t know existed,” says Hayley Mitchell, designer with Hirsch Bedner Associates when the company worked on the project. “We said, ‘Leave them, we’ll work around them.’ It’s part of the character, every element has a story to tell.”

Before the Excelsior’s arrival, Yangon’s heritage hotel scene was dominated by The Strand, Belmond Governor’s Residence and Savoy Hotel Yangon. The Strand, built in 1901 by the Armenian Sarkies brothers, who founded Raffles in Singapore, is particularly iconic, but all these venues largely carved their

own identities from scratch rather than inhabiting older buildings that were already famous.

Like the Excelsior, the new Rosewood and Peninsular hotels are taking over huge, historically vital buildings in a way that no foreign investors have done in Yangon before. Completed in 1931, the New Law Courts building the Rosewood inhabits is a stunner: 9m-tall smooth pillars lining one expansive outer wall, intricate steel doors and deft patterns embedded into stone on ceilings.

The original building was designed by the British engineering consultancy Dorman Long, designers of the Sydney Harbour Bridge. As well as courts, it housed the police commissioner’s office. Then, during World War II, it was used



*From left: The Newsroom café in the Excelsior is inspired by the newsrooms from the heyday of journalism; the entrance to the Excelsior features an artwork that celebrates the important role of traditional typists in the city – you can still see these roadside writers at work today*









as a prison by Japan's feared Kempeitai military police. After Burma gained independence in 1948, the Burmese military used the building.

The Rosewood team are understandably keen to concentrate on the less militaristic aspects of the building's past. "When a project has such a strong history it's much more poetic and romantic than doing a new development," says Lillian Wu, who is responsible for much of the interior design of the hotel. "You have a beautiful body so there's no need for heavy make-up. For example, on the sandstone columns there are beautiful carved floral motifs – we don't need to do anything to those."

There are, however, some compromises. Many less overtly pretty elements of the site, such as a brick layer from the 1860s pre-New Law Courts era, have been removed by the Rosewood team. YHT director Moe Lwin says that despite wincing at the thought of historically important bricks being chucked into the Rosewood's skips, she is optimistic about the hotel preserving enough elements of the building to keep its spirit intact. Along with the Excelsior, the Rosewood could even become a venue to show off on the YHT's walking tours.

"Our vision of Yangon is to protect built-in cultural heritage to pass on to the next generation," says Lwin. Mitchell agrees: "There's not much here to protect heritage, so when people are willing to invest in bringing these buildings back to life, that's amazing."

[yangonheritagetrust.org](http://yangonheritagetrust.org), [yangon-excelsior.com](http://yangon-excelsior.com), [rosewoodhotels.com/yangon](http://rosewoodhotels.com/yangon)

## HISTORY BITES

Where to eat in Yangon's colonial buildings



### Gekko

In 2017 this sleek Japanese restaurant was given an award by the Yangon Heritage Trust for tasteful occupation of a historical site, the old Sofaer & Co building, built in 1906.

[gekkoyangon.com](http://gekkoyangon.com)



### Rangoon Tea House

In the heart of historic Pansodan Road, this super-trendy spot serves classic local tea drinks, plus dishes from Myanmar and wider Asia, such as samosas.

[facebook.com/rangoonteahouse](https://facebook.com/rangoonteahouse)



### Burma Bistro

Found around the corner from the Excelsior and up some stairs behind street sellers, this large, breezy restaurant serves superb regional Burmese dishes. Try the beef curry. [facebook.com/theburmabistro](https://facebook.com/theburmabistro)





*This page:* The Rosewood Hotel is transforming the New Law Courts building on Strand Road, which was completed in 1931

