

# MYANMAR: A COMPARISON BETWEEN PAST AND PRESENT. WHAT IS HAPPENING IN THE FIELD OF ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE CONSERVATION: THE TECHNIQUES USED, THE PRINCIPLES OF PRESERVATION APPLIED AND THE RELATIVE PLANS FOR HERITAGE MANAGEMENT

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## ABSTRACT:

The cultural heritage of Myanmar is undoubtedly an important one; some monuments known at international level are in danger, including for example the site of Bagan, the Pinadaya Caves, Sule Pagoda and the Shwedagon Pagoda at Yangon and a number of timber-built monasteries, due above all to an economic-cultural policy adopted by the country, propending more to reconstruction and renovation of such monuments rather than their conservation based on a cautious maintenance. The International Charters as also international organisations could constitute a valid point of reference for the local government authorities in the re-organisation of management of the architectural-landscape heritage. Undoubtedly some feeble signs of opening may be glimpsed also with a view to a tourist re-evaluation of the places, which does not lose sight of the authenticity and identity of the structures and places.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The entire Far East is in a flurry of economic and cultural activity that is bringing changes in every field. The fact that many countries such as Myanmar, formerly very closed but now open to tourism and to the western culture, prompts a comparison between the cultural heritage situation in this country and that in the western hemisphere. Myanmar did not formally accept the 1972 *Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage* until 1994, having nevertheless ratified in 1956 – accepting the relative protocol – the *Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict with Regulations for the Execution of the Convention, The Hague, 14 May 1954*.

### 1.1 International programmes and the country

Following the series of earthquakes in the 20th century, several projects concerning monuments in the country have been elaborated; for example: between 1994 and 1996, the *Japanese Trust Fund*, under approval from UNESCO, implemented a master plan for the protection of the historical area of Bagan and the conservation and restoration of its monuments. The Professor Yukio Nishimura (University of Tokyo) prepared the master plan of the area and the general guidelines for the cultural heritage protection. Other projects supervised by UNESCO have been carried out in various areas; moreover, other international institutions such as ICOMOS, the Getty Institute in Los Angeles and ICCROM in Rome have also shown interest in the local situation.

At the moment, certain monuments or monumental buildings typical of the country have been identified, as can be seen in the Tentative List, though they have not been inserted officially in the *World Heritage List* (Unesco WHR, 2003).

## 2. SOME SIGNIFICANT EXAMPLES AND REFERENCES TO THE INTERNATIONAL CHARTER ON RESTORATION

### 2.1 Historic area of Bagan and the Pindaya caves

Bagan, with its very distinctive features, is a vast area containing an enormous number of temples devoted to Buddhism, most of them brickwork constructions with some added timber structures built between the 10<sup>th</sup> and the 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. In this long period of existence of the monumental complex, many repairs and reconstructions have been undertaken, given the localisation of Bagan in a seismic zone. Going back in time, the first testimonies to its restorations may be found thanks to certain inscriptions dating from the XIV century, while popular reports also refer to earlier episodes, including among the more recent ones the earthquake of 1956, as referred on a silver plaque set up in the temple of Ananda (built by Kyanwittha in 1091 A.D.) that partially destroyed it. Among the earthquakes that have succeeded one another, the most terrible one was that of July 1975 (the quake measured about 6.0 on the Richter scale and its epicentre was 38 kilometres from the city walls), when a large number of temples were seriously damaged. In the 1980s, following this episode, the Department of Archaeology (founded in 1948 on the country's acquisition of independence), in collaboration with UNESCO drew up a campaign of repairs and also a series of macro-seismic studies to pinpoint those buildings in greatest danger, as well as the most adequate interventions to be carried out on the ancient monuments both for static purposes and for the conservation of the mural paintings (Stadtner D. M., 2005). On that occasion a publication came out, which documents the monuments in an extremely accurate way: this is the *Inventory of Monuments at Pagan*, edited by the French architect Pierre Pichard (Pichard P., 1992-2001). This publication later became a unique work of reference for the restoration and partial or total reconstruction of a large number of buildings, which took place in the 1990s.

To the point that, in certain situations veritable new building was carried out, however in such a case or in the reconstruction

of the buildings itself often the material relative to fallen temples completely in ruins was re-used, side by side with that of recent production.

It is easy to note from the photographic evidence, that many buildings have been reconstructed in their essential parts, or else completed, because in the course of time they had lost certain of their more fragile parts, especially the small spires or the superior umbrella. In the case of Ngakywenadaung Pagoda, built by King Taungthugyi in the 10<sup>th</sup> century A.D., consisting of a bulbous dome on a tapering circular base, the finial is completely reconstructed (Stadtner D. M., 2005). Another example is the Htilominlo Temple, built in 1218 A.D. by King Nandaungmya. The temple which in the 1950s was without its principal spire likewise those of the lower terraces, have today been completely reconstructed (Win Lu Pe U., 1955). Whereas a large part of the stucco decoration has been lost and not reinstated. On the contrary the statues of Buddha in the niches, wherever these were missing, have been replaced with other newly made ones. The total rebuilding or integration with new statues representing Buddha in his traditional postures is a very frequent practice to be found in many other buildings.



Figure 1. Bagan, Nann Myint Viewing Tower

A sensational case is that of the great controversy that flared up when a luxury hotel with a high tower was being built in the Bagan valley directly overlooking the temples. In fact in the level open space where the temples stand, already from afar the onlooker cannot fail to see the Nann Myint Viewing Tower (Figure 1), open to the public as from 2005. This tower is a full 60 metres high and was built partially in steel and glass and above all in reinforced concrete faced with bricks, to imitate a style compatible with the existing architecture. The government authorities have superficially justified their consent to the building of the tower, in the sense of foreseeing the possibility of being able to enjoy views of the place from a panoramic position, thereby avoiding having to climb up on the temples, with the risk of causing further deterioration of such buildings. In actual fact, given all of the activities, including restaurants, offices, and a luxury hotel which have been set up inside and around the foot of the tower, it would seem that there are other types of economic interest involved. Surely, Bagan has a central role to play in the cultural and religious life of the country, besides the touristic-economic one, all of which reasons served to encourage the reconstruction campaign of the 1990s condemned by many experts of the sector (Crampton T., 2005). If we critically analyse the case of Bagan, we may deduce that the utilisation of new materials and the indiscriminate use of concrete have contributed to falsifying to a considerable extent the existing monuments, accordingly many experts speak of them as being Disney style set on a historic-religious site. Unfortunately all too often the initial intentions were based

above all on a reconstruction not founded on strictly scientific bases but rather fruit of a fervent imagination.

The recommendations of UNESCO for the conservation of the masonry works and the paintings with the drawing up of a master plan went unheeded, since in actual fact the convictions of the government authorities, even if with certain dissentient voices, timidly raised, on the part of the local authorities and experts, found other systems for the safeguarding of the place, favouring above all the economic exploitation deriving from a site of such interest. As indeed is undoubtedly questionable the choice of allowing the building of a road which cuts across the site and an airport very close to the city, as well as a number of sports venues.

Good maintenance and conservation projects should certainly not be confused with the new uncontrolled building; reconstruction and re-makes; while abandonment likewise implies risks, such for example as the overgrowth of the vegetation which very quickly gets out of hand and, while for a well monitored site like that of Bagan this may be somewhat rare, in fact for the minor structures present in the country it is very easy to find cases of the kind, for example a number of temple complexes in the city of Nyaungshwe.

The spreading of the Disney style is not circumscribed to the case of Bagan alone; the Pindaya Caves (Figure 2) are another emblematic example. The Pindaya caves are carved out of a limestone ridge overlooking the Pindaya lake and are characterised by the presence of thousands of Buddha images made from alabaster, teak, marble, brick, lacquer and cement which have been placed there in the course of time since the 11<sup>th</sup> century and arranged in such a way as to form a labyrinth throughout the various cave chambers. In accordance with a local legend, the modern access to the caves has been achieved with statues of deplorable taste, and above an imposing structure in reinforced concrete and glass with adjoining lift disfigures the surrounding landscape. The interior continues to be evocative, but in this case too it has seen the addition of a staircase in ceramic tiling, which has likewise been used for the flooring inside the cave. Unfortunately not all the Buddha statues still enjoy their original colouring or at least part of it, in fact quite recently they have been repainted or in certain cases fresh gilding has been applied.



Figure 2. Pindaya caves

These types of works have been undertaken in accordance with different principles ranging from those indicated in the International Charters on architectural conservation to methods normally employed in the Western culture, not to mention the new constructions standing near the ancient ones which follow no precise town-planning model. Already as from the *Venice Charter* (1964) a number of fundamental principles begin to take shape concerning the conservation of monuments: it is

indispensable to ensure conservation of the structure together with preservation of the setting. No new constructions, demolitions or modifications liable to gravely alter the existing equilibriums are accepted (*Venice Charter*, 1964, Art. 6). And then, coming down to more specific considerations, one of the principal objectives is: "to preserve and reveal the aesthetic and historic value of the monument...which is based on respect for original material and authentic documents" (*Venice Charter*, 1964, Art. 9). In the case of replacements of missing parts, these "must be distinguishable from the original, so that restoration does not falsify the artistic or historic value." (*Venice Charter*, 1964, Art. 12). Based on direct investigation it may easily be noted, that in the case of Bagan and of the Pindaya Caves, certain indications have not been followed. For Bagan, reconstruction at all costs has been preferred, with the result that, once a short time has elapsed, often the new interventions can no longer be distinguished, indeed new buildings have the ambition of being confused as far as possible with the ancient ones.

## 2.2 The Sule Pagoda and the Shwedagon Pagoda, Yangon

Another great scandal arose with the construction of gigantic skyscrapers that overlook and constitute an eyesore to the area surrounding one of the most important monuments of the country, the Sule Pagoda in Yangon (Figure 3). The Pagoda is said to have been built more than 2000 years ago, but has undergone multiple restorations and renovations since then. The contrast between the contemporary and the ancient architecture is very marked, indeed the overpowering of the temple by the new buildings is total, thus also diminishing its symbolic importance.



Figure 3. Yangon, The Sule Pagoda and the buildings

In addition new architectural modifications have been carried out which have substantially changed its external appearance with the inclusion of new rooms against the perimeter of the building, also more magnificent entrances have been made at the main points of the compass. The style partially picks up in its design that of the typical architecture, creating undoubted contrasts with that already existing. Whereas one of the symbols of the country, the Shwedagon Pagoda (Figure 4), is another emblematic example of architecture. Little is known about the foundation of the monument, probably in the XIV century when from a small pavilion a pagoda of larger dimensions was created, but almost certainly the work of greatest entity was carried out in the XV century under Shinsawbu (1453-1472), founder of the new dynasty of Hanthawaddy (Moore E., Mayer H., Win Pe U, 1999).

In the course of the centuries the structure of the Shwedagon Pagoda was damaged by a series of earthquakes of which that

of June 1768 proved particularly serious, and it was precisely on this occasion that one of the biggest tasks of reconstruction was undertaken. In 1824 the British troops established their headquarters in the Pagoda, because of its strategic position in the country, and it was only in February 1826, with the end of the war, that the troops evacuated the Shwedagon. Following this episode and after the subsequent invasions by British troops in 1852 and in 1885 quite serious damages were inflicted, which made it necessary to reinstate certain fundamental parts.



Figure 4. Yangon, The Shwedagon Pagoda

The restoration works took place in 1929, nearly 80 years after it was last occupied and on 2 March 1930 a ceremony took place with the celebration of the re-opening of the Western Stairway for public use. Unfortunately only one year after this episode, one of the temporary structures set up for the ceremony caught fire and spread to many other parts of the temple complex which were burnt down, above all some of the most beautiful buildings erected between the XIX and the XX century. The subsequent reconstruction of the buildings was slow and in any case the previous quality of the architecture was not achieved. The next great period of building activity ran from the late 1980s to the 1990s. The State Law and the Order Restoration Council encouraged the arts and on this occasion many works were undertaken with the construction of the Museum, the Library and the Archives and renovation of the stairways (Chain U Tun Aung, Hlaing U Thein, 1996). The Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon was completely restored, the gold re-painted with gold or gilded in some parts and the flooring was replaced by a new one. Very often the roofs of the monuments were repainted in gold, if not covered uninterruptedly in very fine gold leaf as prescribed by tradition. The southern entrance has changed in appearance, having been enlarged over the years, as may be noted from the historic photographs of the place, probably in response to the growing requirements of being able to accommodate an ever larger number of tourists above all religious, coming from all over the country. The timber structures are those which have undergone the most replacements, first of all with masonry structures, whereas later cement got the upper hand, so that in the latest interventions carried out the use of this material has irreversibly transformed the structure of the building. Moreover, the town-planning changes in the city and the building of new roads and new buildings have substantially altered the relationship of the monument with the context in which it was set. Polemics on the area surrounding the Pagoda are still open, there is talk of creating a protected zone where buildings more than six storeys high are not supposed to be built. A project for a building of twenty-one storeys has been transformed in accordance with the guidelines of the local authorities to nine storeys, because it was situated to the west of the pagoda, and in its close vicinity.

Some attempts are now being made, though amidst conflicting opinions, to save the Yangon skyline, to avoid diminishing the importance of the Shwedagon's presence.

U-Sun OO, chairman of the Yangon-based architecture firm Design 2000, said: "Such buildings create 'visual pollution' that can alter the neighbourhood around the pagoda – now mostly wooden houses, temples, religious stores and family-run teashops". (Khaing T., 2006, p. 1, 5) *Architects apprehensive over building spree around Shwedagon Pagoda*, in The Myanmar Times July 31<sup>st</sup> – August 6<sup>th</sup> 2006, pages 1, 5).

It is not a question only of limiting the height of buildings, but also of carefully studying all the other aspects of planning, regarding the choice of function, the shape, materials and colours... so as to achieve a good integration of the new buildings in their setting. The big danger to be averted is that the identity of the place vanishes when new buildings are erected indiscriminately, proving the non-existence of a good town planning, moreover, the authenticity of the buildings is often irreversibly endangered when restoration proves too drastic.

### 2.3 The timber structures

From historic evidence, it may be noted that wooden architecture has often been penalised, since it is easily destroyed or removed, and in any case tends to be underestimated compared to that in stone or in masonry.

In 1886 when Myanmar was officially annexed to the British Empire of India, Lord Curzon, Viceroy of India, promoted archaeological studies and the preservation of relics. Following a visit paid to Myanmar (1901), the Ancient Monuments Preservation Act (1904) was approved, after which it was decided to proceed to a compilation of the 'protected monuments' of historical, archaeological and/or artistic interest, which were placed under the jurisdiction of the Department of Archaeology in Burma. In 1916 about five hundred monuments came to be included in the list and, of these, only a small number had wooden structures, that many experts failed to appreciate compared to monuments in stone, which some considered more magnificent (Green A., Blurton R., 2002).

This country is not the only one where wooden structures are particularly widespread: in fact in China, Japan and Korea techniques for the building of wooden edifices have been widely studied for centuries. What distinguishes Myanmar from the other countries is the recourse had to highly simplified methods from the point of view of the various architectural elements. The structural joints are simple and conceived in a rational manner. Structural frames and flexible concepts of composition make it possible to create prefabricated elements which allow them to be adapted for making buildings of different sizes according to the various requirements and needs. On the contrary the finishing touches, once more depending on the importance of the building in question are, above all for religious ones, extremely refined and characterised by complex carved wooden panels.

Both the dwellings and the other typologies of buildings have in common the fact of being conceived on a level raised up on columns above ground floor level, and in general these columns rest on a stone base so as to avoid any infiltrations of damp, unless they are built completely over water like the structures located on the banks of rivers or lakes like for example the very well-known ones of Lake Inle.

The system of building has made it possible for outstanding examples to be passed down to us, despite the different vicissitudes, wars and earthquakes, and most of these works are in any case of great importance. Two principal periods may be

distinguished, depending on two different typologies: the era of great temple building in Bagan (1044-1287) and those relative to the Konbaung kings (1752-1885). Undoubtedly the monasteries occupy an important place, and some of these even if under the protection of The Archaeological Survey, in actual fact have not received the attention they deserve over time, indeed all maintenance expenses have continued to be met by the monks. Unfortunately during the Second World War many monasteries were burned down, including the Konbaung royal monasteries, so just only Shwenandaaw Kyaung in Mandalay (Figure 5) has remained standing until today. The latter was reconstructed in its present shapes in 1878-1883 (Fraser Lu S., 2001). The monastery consists of a central hall (35 m by 21 m) and other secondary ones around it and is sustained on a platform of 2 metres by as many as 150 teak pillars. The building, inside is almost completely gilded and adorned with glass mosaic and both inside and outside is finely decorated with examples of woodcarvings, partially replaced in recent times. There are traces of some localised interventions of restoration, such for example as some reinforcement rings around the columns and fortunately, in this case, no attempt has been made to undertake works of indiscriminate gilding as elsewhere, even if certain traces demonstrate their presence both inside, where today it clearly remains still, and outside. For the outside, it would be desirable above all to envisage maintenance work which, together with other works, would foresee the conservation of what is still left.



Figure 5. Mandalay, Shwenandaaw Kyaung

Following the devastating earthquake of 1975, which hit above all the Bagan area, UNESCO drew up a conservation project in the early 1980s which in any case succeeded in drawing attention to the timber structures. In 1983, Jacques Dumarçay, an expert on South-East Asia, was entrusted with drawing up an inventory of timber monasteries worthy of preservation, twenty-three such monuments were indicated and the most urgent measures to be taken on these by teams of expert carpenters coming under the dependencies of the Department of Archaeology were programmed (Fraser Lu S., 2001). Many of these buildings were first of all dismantled, then restored, then re-assembled on concrete blocks to stabilise the structure and create a barrier against termites, or at the very least many were anchored to concrete foundations like the monastery Shwenandaaw Kyaung itself in Mandalay (restoration dated 1996).

In actual fact in the 1980s these directives proposed by the team of the French expert were subsequently not scrupulously followed, while thereafter in the 1990s the country's policy still focusing on tourist development led to the reconstruction of many wooden buildings, for example the Konbaung Palace in Mandalay or else the Audience Hall of Kanbawza Thadi in



Pegu, using mixed techniques of reinforced concrete, timber elements and stucco decorations instead of wood-carvings. To date the main idea of the local authorities in any case remains that of maintaining the structures, but above all in order to avoid losing them, the reconstruction according to its original forms in such a way as to represent physically and symbolically the original ones. Unfortunately this is in contradiction with the directives laid down by the International Charters on Restoration which prescribe minimal intervention and respect of the physical integrity and historic value of the site, where 'the primary aim of preservation and conservation is to maintain the historic authenticity and integrity of the cultural heritage' (*Principles for the Preservation of Historic Timber Structures*, Mexico City, 1999, art. 4).



Figure 6. Renovation works at Shwei Yan Pye Kyaung

The inclusion of new technologies in these edifices creates quite marked contrasts, indeed the fact that the technological systems are mainly carried out in an improvised way often disfigures the existing part, as for example in the splendid monastery Shwei Yan Pye Kyaung (Yaung kwe district, Shan State), dating from 1888. The building has been undergoing renovations since 1998 with the addition of important structural parts. There are a number of cases such as that of the monastery Nga He Chaung (Lake Inle, dating back to 1843) where the majesty, the complexity and the beauty of the structure clash with a policy of conservation liable to criticism; in fact major substitutions may be noted, such as that of the typical roofing by sheet metal, thus bearing witness to a quite widespread practice both in the field of civil and of religious architecture.

In certain cases a worrying phenomenon is now occurring, namely the trade in certain particularly desirable sculptural decorative parts which are removed from their original settings and lost for ever; for this reason particular encouragement is forthcoming for the creation of an extremely detailed database of the architectural heritage, capable of preventing any such episodes and permitting greater control and a more careful conservation of the same, not forgetting of course the previously constituted inventories. Moreover every effort should be made to avoid arriving at extreme cases of neglect, where due to lack of maintenance on the architectural structures, it then becomes extremely difficult to recover the monument as time passes, as has happened to a number of monasteries in the Mandalay area, including for example the Sa daw Wun min Kyaung or those in the neighbourhood of Bagan, the monasteries of Pakang Gye and Pankang Gyi.

#### 2.4 Some references to International Charters

When comparing local works with International Charters on Restoration, the *Venice Charter* (1964) is one of the most

important references together with all the subsequent ones; then there are more recent Eastern documents such as the *Burra Charter* (1979, revised in 1999), the *Nara Document on Authenticity* (1994) and the *Hoi An Protocols for Best Conservation Practice in Asia* (2005).

*The Nara document on Authenticity* (1994) draws attention to the respect for cultural diversity and the fundamental role of the authenticity of the cultural heritage in conservation and restoration planning. While *the Burra Charter* seeks to give very precise definitions and indications in the sector, which however do not always entirely clarify certain procedural choices. For the drafting of the *Hoi An Protocols for Best Conservation Practice in Asia* (2005), many earlier documents were taken as models and re-drafted for the purpose of establishing 'regional guidelines for best practice in conservation of specifically Asian building materials and methods, such as earth building, local brick, carved wood, marble carving and inlay, mirror inlay, mural painting, etc. These should conform to International Charters accepted by UNESCO, ICOMOS, etc. but focus on Asian needs. Support of traditional building crafts and guilds is an integral part of this process (*Hoi An Protocols for Best Conservation in Asia*, Art. 11). Undoubtedly some of these charters to which reference has been made as well as other fundamental ones such as *Principles for the Analysis, Conservation and Structural Restoration of Architectural Heritage* with the annexes *Recommendations* (Victoria Falls, 2003) and *Principles For the Preservation of Historic Timber Structures* (Mexico City, 1999), should be taken as references at least for certain fundamental parts recurrent in many of them and which may be employed in different typologies of buildings. The rich production of charters bears witness to the recent efforts also made in many South-East Asian countries to be at the forefront in the sector of the valorisation and safeguarding of architectural and landscape assets. Specifically in the conservation of architectural assets, the conviction is spreading that the symbolic evidence of buildings is no longer sufficient, indeed the need to maintain the building also in its material integrity would appear fundamental.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

The cultural heritage of Myanmar is without doubt priceless, but it lacks accurate and punctual control; this could be improved with the use of a database on the national cultural heritage specifically conceived for the various spheres of competence. To speed matters up and improve plans for the conservation of architectural and artistic resources, the new techniques for geometric surveys and for recording the state of the heritage would be essential aids. With the exclusion of a number of serious episodes, some of which have been described in the paper, the country is rich in an architectural and landscape heritage not totally spoiled by serious alterations, which it would appear fundamental to subject to a re-organisation as regards its general management, so as to be in a position to draw up management plans carefully studied case by case. The International Charters and certain international programmes might provide back-up in this respect with management plans and regulations that reflect international trends, foreseeing strategies for ongoing maintenance and also in the case of exceptional natural disasters (earthquakes, tidal waves, etc.). Undoubtedly in this sector the museums are very heavily penalised and would require a complete and total re-arrangement. In fact, the exhibition areas require updating, not only to facilitate visitors but also to show off the objects to best effect: there are some very fine artistic items on show but unfortunately they cannot be appreciated to the full because of

the inappropriate and disorganised way in which they are displayed, as in the National Museum of the capital.

There is no doubt that, if it is to succeed in the attempt at a total re-organisation, the political conditions even more than the economic and cultural ones should be such as to allow for such changes, most certainly to be considered as a long-term option.

The country definitely does not lack the will and enthusiasm to preserve its cultural heritage, especially its architecture, in the best way and for a long time; Since Myanmar is not completely influenced yet by the uncontrolled transformation taking place in many Oriental countries, it deserves particular attention to avoid mistakes that might endanger the state and authenticity and identity of its cultural heritage.

Photographs by Beatrice Messeri

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