

MONSOON ASSEMBLAGES

YANGON FIELD TRIP REPORT November 2018

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Yangon Field Trip Report by Beth Cullen

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UNIVERSITY OF
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ASSEMBLAGES

Itinerary



European
Commission

Horizon 2020
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Week 1	Monday 19 th November	Tuesday 20 th November	Wednesday 21 st November	Thursday 22 nd November	Friday 23 rd November	Saturday 24 th November	Sunday 25 th November
	Yangon						
Notes	AM: Hotel arrangements and setting up meetings PM: Downtown Yangon	AM: Meet with an environmentalist PM: Meeta civil servant; Puppet show at Goethe Institute	AM: Shwedagon Pagoda; meet an art curator PM: Downtown Yangon; Bogyoke Market; Central Railway	AM: Full moon celebrations (public holiday – no meetings) PM: Sule Pagoda	AM: Visit the MET Office PM: National Museum	AM: Downtown Yangon PM: Shwedagon Pagoda	AM: Circular Railway PM: Meet architect 2
Week 2	Monday 26 th November	Tuesday 27 th November	Wednesday 28 th November				
	Yangon						
Notes	AM: Meet academic 2; Inya Lake; PM: GyoByu Pipeline; Yangon Heritage Trust	AM: Meet an activist PM: meet a geologist and an artist	AM: Return to London				

FIELDNOTES

Summary

During February 2018, Beth Cullen and Christina Geros spent ten days in Yangon conducting fieldwork. The aim of the trip was to establish contacts and identify potential research themes in advance of a longer fieldtrip later in the year. There was a focus on establishing links with artists as possible participants in the project's final workshops in the city.

WEEK 1

Monday 19th November

- Arrived on Sunday evening (18th November) and was met at the airport by the hotel pickup. We were taken to a different branch of the hotel than the one we had booked. In the morning, we moved to the 21st Street branch of the hotel (where we had originally booked). Spent the morning contacting people to arrange meetings – many of the people we had identified could not be contacted by email in advance so we made telephone calls instead. Managed to set up meetings with an environmentalist, a civil servant and a geologist. Spoke to woman on the front desk of the hotel about the Full Moon festival (Tazaungmone) which is happening on the 21st and 22nd November. Apparently, the festival marks the end of the rainy seasons, people give donations to monks to buy new robes and other items. There will be festivities at the Pagodas and offices will be closed.

- In the afternoon, we spent some time walking around the streets near the hotel. Went to a coffee shop in China Town and then to the Rangoon Teahouse and Port. Walked along the waterfront and visited the Strand Hotel and then through the Maha Bandula Park to the Sule Pagoda. On the way back to the hotel spoke to an elderly man who mentioned the different sections of the city (China Town, Indian quarter) also pointed at the mosques and church and commented that the Western media promotes an idea of Myanmar having no religious freedom. Also said that Buddhist people are taught to help people so we can ask anyone for help.

Tuesday 20th November

- Arranged meeting with the environmentalist. Working on river basin management and said that flooding has been getting worse in the last four to five years.
- Went to meet with the civil servant at 1.30pm. Spoke about shrimp farming in Rakhine State and mangrove conservation as part of an integrated shrimp development plan. Mentioned the need for 'master planning' but limited interaction with other natural resource management initiatives.
- Attended puppet show event called 'Hidden Ghosts of Myanmar' at the Goethe Institute. Amazing performance involving young artists who engage with ghosts in a variety of ways (personally, spiritually, socially and politically) using self-made puppets (drawing on traditional puppetry) and a range of materials.

Wednesday 21st November

- Left the hotel early in the morning to visit the Shwedagon Pagoda – sacred golden pagoda that dominates the Yangon skyline and is intimately linked to the origins of the city. (Oldest Buddhist stupa in the world). Incredible experience.
- Arranged to meet with an art curator who manages an exhibition space, commercial gallery and library dedicated to promoting contemporary art and supporting local artists. Visited her gallery in colonial building on Bogalay Zay Street. Described the aims of the project and the idea of the city workshops. She was enthusiastic and thought that creating conversations that bridge south and southeast Asia was interesting – complicates/questions the notion of bounded regions.
- Went with the art curator to Pansuriya a coffee shop located on the same road as her gallery. Bumped into an activist whom I had sent emails in advance of the trip but hadn't had a response. Set up a meeting with him next week. He mentioned that they are working with participatory video / photography techniques. Mentioned that weather is very hot at the moment, apparently this is unseasonal.
- Spent the afternoon walking through downtown Yangon to experience the city. Took photographs of various colonial buildings; came across a street art project which looked interesting (something to explore further); saw full moon preparations (celebratory lights and lanterns). Visited Bogyoke Market where we visited a stall specializing in precious and semi-precious gems (ruby, jade, amber and fossilized wood), BC photographed jade cutting operations

in back room and was shown how jade is inspected using torches to look for cracks that indicate quality of the stone. Ended by visiting the central railway station.

Thursday 22nd November

- Today was a public holiday so most things were closed. Lots of celebrations and preparations going on in the city today and lots of food stalls on the streets. Worked for much of the day at Pansuriya where lots of expats were hanging out and working.
- Had dinner at the Rangoon Teahouse, was offered complimentary salad at end of the meal made from Cassia fistula (golden rain tree), apparently, they are most potent on day of the full moon and have many health benefits. Concert by popular Myanmar musician happening in the park – lots of people! Visited the small Sule Pagoda where people were praying. Saw people releasing sparrows for good luck. Also saw women with Burmese pythons among the stalls but not sure of their significance.

Friday 23rd November

- Arranged a meeting this morning with the Yangon MET Office. staff were very welcoming. Had a long conversation about changing monsoon patterns, changing cyclone patterns (apparently the “birth place” of cyclones is shifting from the Bay of Bengal to the Andaman Sea), they also mentioned plastic as significant as it is making flooding worse in Yangon. We were given a tour around the MET Office including the radar tower (funded by Japan and forms part of a monitoring system for ‘disastrous weather’).

Amazing views over Yangon from the top of the tower. Also spotted what looked like *Pantala flavescens* dragonflies in the office compound.

- In the afternoon, we visited the National Museum. Saw the 'Lion Throne' which belonged to the last king of Myanmar. Interesting displays related to different ethnic groups of Myanmar. Cultural artefacts included a Burmese rain drum, made from five different metals symbolizing unity. Visited a small café outside the museum and came across a copy of Frontier Magazine featuring an article titled 'The artery of Yangon' which mentioned a colonial-era pipeline that delivers water to the capital from the GyoByu reservoir to the north. An architect, Raphael Monnier (Blue Temple) is using the pipeline to develop green public spaces in the city. Thought he would be a good person to make contact with.

Saturday 24th November

- Spent the morning in Downtown Yangon. Worked in the morning and tried to set up additional meetings for the final few days. Spoke to a man at the Burma Café who was very keen for tourists to be in the country. Talked about the colonial buildings which had been built by the 'British Government', and mentioned the vast amounts of money being put into restoration efforts. Seems that ordinary people very ambivalent about the money and effort being put into maintaining colonial architecture and heritage.
- Went to the Shwedagon Pagoda in the evening, arrived just before sunset. Lots of insect and bird life and lots of people. Very different atmosphere than the previous visit. Tour guide told us about Buddhist rituals. Hoped to see bats that

apparently inhabit the western entrance of the pagoda but not many in evidence.

Sunday 25th November

- Took circular train line earlier in the morning. Interesting way of seeing the areas outside the main downtown area. Green areas and wetlands very evident around the city. A lot of urban farming taking place along the railway line. Insect life is abundant – lots of butterflies and dragonflies flying alongside the train (possibly including *Pantala flavescens*). Took lots of video footage and photos.
- In the afternoon, we arranged to meet with architect 2 to discuss the GyoByu pipeline project. Seems Yangon is still very reliant on infrastructure that was developed under British rule. Apparently there is another pipeline that connects Inya Lake with Kandawgyi Lake near the pagoda, both of which are 'reservoirs' constructed by the British. Raphael explained that Blue Temple are trying to establish a 'platform' in the city, bringing together different stakeholders. Has links with the University. Working with a photographer to capture people's view and experience of the pipeline from their perspective. Planning a workshop around the pipeline to initiate conversations about bottom-up planning, waste collection/recycling and urban farming. Spoke about urban planning issues and prejudices against 'migrants' to the city.

WEEK 2

Monday 26th November

- Visited academic 2 and a number of her colleagues at the University of Yangon. Spoke about monsoon and traditional festivals. Some staff are working with specific ethnic groups in the country and some on urban issues. They suggested potential sites in the Delta region and spirulina lake in Sagaing Region.
- From the University, we went to Inya Lake and based on information from architect 2 found the GyoByo pipeline on No. 1 Industrial Road near the Myanmar Plaza. Useful to confirm the location of the pipeline - we can now trace it on Google map (or parts of it). Not quite clear how far it extends and which water bodies it connects. Need to find it some further information. Took some photos and observed people sitting on the pipe, but we didn't walk along it.
- In the late afternoon, we visited a heritage organisation. Spent time looking at their exhibits and photographed old maps, which useful references to colonial place names (useful for any historical research that we might do).

Tuesday 27th November

- Met with the photographic gallery curator. Explained the project and spoke with him about monsoonal dynamics in Yangon and the wider country. Plastic is one of the main problems. Downtown area also badly affected because of the topography and it was built on a wetland. UNEARTH Project started through a photographer who had been

documenting the jade mines for a long time. Built the project out of that work, but too much for one person to cover. Country very tightly controlled so different people have to travel to different regions - e.g. the photographic gallery curator, as a foreigner can't gain access to certain parts of the country.

- Returned to the art curator's gallery and purchased books for the project. One book in particular features work by an artist who represents the monsoon and 'vibrant materials' through installation pieces.
- Met with a geologist at the Engineering Society building at the University of Yangon Hlaing Campus, near Inya Lake. He trained in hydro-geology but has a very keen interest in links between geology and climate. Mentioned that he is collaborating with the Chinese to explore the history of the Myanmar monsoon, linked to changes in civilisation patterns. They are gathering data by collecting sediment samples from a lake. Spoke about problems of unregulated groundwater extraction around the city and problems of salinity intrusion.
- Met with an artist. Spoke about how the weather/climate influences people's work. Monsoon and weather does not feature very strongly in work by artists from Myanmar (in contrast to Bangladesh). They seemed to say that this was something that people who paint art for tourists would focus on. Divide between "tourist art" and serious art. Weather and landscape perceived as romantic and not critical or political.

