Urban Livelihoods in Specific Yangon Neighborhoods and the Economics of Heritage Protection Study
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Preface

Government officials, planning professionals, scholars and residents all agree that Yangon is undergoing unprecedented change. The national reforms initiated in 2011 followed by the lifting of sanctions have ushered in fast-paced urban development that threatens to alter the character of Yangon before the local government and population have a chance to reflect on what they value and how they want to respond. International organizations have offered assistance in capacity building and urban planning. However, the pressure of accelerated change demands immediate action, pushing local and international experts to proceed with little knowledge about how the city of Yangon actually works. Managing for rapid change has had to take place as knowledge is slowly generated and has had to adopt sweeping solutions without adequate consideration for the complex interconnections and contradictions in Yangon.

This 26-day study on urban livelihoods and the economics of heritage protection contributes to a broader effort to understand the intricacies of urban life and urban systems. It approaches livelihood from the perspective of everyday residents and focuses on the daily negotiations necessary to make a living in the city. Therefore, it focuses on details and contingencies and does not claim to be a representative study.1 The analysis of the three blocks: Bogalay Zay Street (upper), 26th Street (lower) and Latha Street (lower) should be read as case studies that can serve as comparisons for future research. These findings should not be generalized or applied to the city as a whole without verification through additional research.

In addition, this research and analysis prioritizes interconnections – between people, communities, streets, neighborhoods, townships, the city of Yangon and its less urbanized periphery. While a 26-day study can only begin to trace the extensive relationships between these different groups and systems, placing interconnections at the forefront ensures a higher awareness of the city as an open and dynamic system. The dynamism and unpredictability of cities and urbanization will require constant attention and active participation from all levels of the municipal government and Yangon residents. Multiple actors are necessary to build a vibrant, livable and sustainable city.

1 In non-academic circles, there is some confusion regarding the word “representative”. In general quantitative studies – studies that survey a sufficiently large base of respondents through random sampling – are thought to be unbiased and accurate enough to indicate general characteristics or trends that can be applied to everyone within the scope of the study. As a rule, qualitative studies do not generate findings that are representative or generalizable. They provide context-specific knowledge about particular cases. There continues to be debate about the merits and validity of quantitative and qualitative studies. For an overview of these different methods, please see D.E. Polkinghorne, Methodology for the Human Sciences: Systems of Inquiry (State University of New York Press, 1983).
Due to the scarcity of scholarship about Yangon, the findings presented in this report draw upon prior research that has yet to be published.² Despite this grounding, no international expert, however experienced in and dedicated to Myanmar, can reach what one might call “real” or “local” understanding without informed interlocutors. This research benefitted greatly from the assistance of Daw San San Htwe and U Aung Soe Naing. The analysis of the three specified blocks were furthered by their insights as native Yangon residents – I thank them for their generosity of spirit. I would also like to extend my thanks to U Toe Aung for supporting this research by allowing Daw San San Htwe to participate and to U Kyan Dyne Aung for his administrative support.

² There are no published contemporary studies about Yangon. For historical studies, see B.R. Pearn, History of Rangoon (Rangoon: American Baptist Mission Press, 1939; repr., 1971 by Gregg International Publishers Ltd., Westmeand, Farnborough, Hants., England); Sarah Maxim, "Resemblance in External Appearance: The Colonial Project in Kuala Lumpur and Rangoon" (Ph.D., Cornell, 1992). There are a few pieces regarding SLORC/SPDC Myanmar such as Than Than Nwe, “Yangon: The Emergence of a New Spatial Order in Myanmar’s Capital City,” Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia 13, no. 1 (1998). The author of this report, Jayde Lin Roberts, is continuing a multi-year project to study Yangon and has presented about the city in several conferences including the 2014 International Myanmar Studies Conference and the 2014 International Association for the Study of Traditional Environments Conference.
I. Introduction

Livelihood would seem to be a simple word that means how one makes a living. However, in our common sense application of the word, we often forget about the complex interconnections that enable us to live securely, that is: 1) to earn a sufficient income to support ourselves and our families, 2) to access goods and services, and 3) to feel at home. In addition, livelihood studies tend to focus on poor and marginal communities that struggle to survive. In the context of cities, the question of livelihood is most often associated with the urban poor, usually labeled as slums or informal settlements.

However, in this study of three specific neighborhoods and the economics of heritage protection, livelihood should be conceived of as much more than an economic question. It should include the various interconnected aspects of living in a city and pay particular attention to the effects of the built environment. That is:

- How do people live and work in the three specified neighborhoods: Bogalay Zay Street (Upper Block), 26th Street (Lower Block), and Latha Street (Lower Block)?

3 As Bogalay Zay Street is only two blocks in length and both blocks are south of the Secretariat, there is some inconsistency in the naming of the blocks. Some Yangon residents refer to the block under examination (between Mahabandoola and Merchant) as the Upper Block while others call it the Lower Block. This is because at the scale of the entire downtown, this block just south of the Secretariat is in alignment with other “Lower Blocks”. However, within the smaller scale of the street itself, the block just south of the Secretariat is above the other half of the street, thereby officially making it the Upper Block.

- Does the built environment (the street design, shops, homes, markets and sidewalks) support or hinder living securely and comfortably in these specific blocks?

- What are the relationships between these three blocks and the rest of the city? Which systems (transportation, markets and other social institutions) run through these blocks and affect the living on these streets?

Furthermore, livelihood, as the way of living, is significantly affected by the liveliness in and livability of cities.

Liveliness is a word and concept that translates easily between languages and cultures. It can be defined as the amount of human activity (commercial, social, cultural, leisure and religious) in a particular place. Although people might have different preferences for the amount of activity in their neighborhood, a lively place is generally seen as conducive to generating income and promotes more interactions between people.

Livability, on the other hand, does not translate well between different languages and cultures. This is a newer concept in urban design and planning which still awaits place-specific research to identify how different cultures define livability. For decades, livability has been measured through quantitative criteria such as ‘standard of living’. This standard equates livability with material comforts such as running water, electricity, toilets, number of rooms per household and car ownership. These standards are important but fail to address the less measurable aspects of the built environment south of the Secretariat.
such as social relationships and attachment to place, which are just as important in creating vibrant, sustainable neighborhoods.

These connections between livelihood, liveliness and livability should come as no surprise as they are all derived from the verb ‘to live’ and focus on what is life-giving. Therefore, in addressing the three key questions of the TOR (listed below), the interconnections between livelihood, liveliness and livability remain at the forefront of analysis.

1. The existing nature, mechanisms and systems by which local residents engage in economic activity: *qualitative data presented.*

2. The relationship between urban heritage and existing local economies: *some indirect relationships uncovered.*

3. The needs and aspirations of local residents in relationship to economic activity: *respondents were unable to answer, therefore inconclusive.*

This report will continue with a brief overview of the colonial era design of Rangoon in Section II followed by specific analysis of the three blocks in Section III. Section IV will compare the three blocks, highlighting issues that are shared across the different townships and discuss livelihood in Yangon as a whole. Section V examines the relationship between livelihood and heritage protection. Finally, Section VI considers the future of Yangon. Details regarding the research design and methodology are presented in Appendix A. Additional resources are listed in Appendix B.
II. The Three Blocks in the Yangon Street Hierarchy

This research builds on the Built Form Study completed in April 2014 and provides additional layers of information (social, cultural and economic) for better understanding the three designated blocks. As stated in the previous study, Bogalay Zay Street (Upper Block), 26th Street (Lower Block), and Latha Street (Lower Block) are a part of the rectilinear downtown designed and built by the British colonial government after 1852. The hierarchical street grid has remained largely unaltered since the colonial era and still determines the character of downtown streets to a great extent.

As designed by the British, street widths indicated the significance and function of the streets. For north-south streets, the 100-foot wide streets were seen as important commercial corridors that housed the most successful businesses, merchant families and associations. The 50-foot wide streets were for smaller businesses, in effect one class down from the 100-foot wide streets. The 30-foot streets were mostly residential and seen as less prestigious than the wider streets. This hierarchical design is evident in the colonial naming of the streets in which the 100- and 50-foot wide streets were given names such as Latter (now Latha) Street and Brookings (now Bogalay Zay) Street while the 30-foot wide streets were merely numbered. Furthermore, the property in the gridded downtown were divided into five different classes in which the lots closest to the Yangon River and in the business district were the most expensive and came with specific building requirements that mandated brick construction and pukka roofs.

This hierarchy of spaces is still legible in contemporary Yangon and will be discussed within the context of each block. The block-specific analysis will be divided into five different categories: character, commerce, costs, connections and community.

Much of the information below will appear to be common sense knowledge for Yangon residents. In many ways, long-term residents of a place are the local experts who embody a depth of understanding that cannot be achieved within the limited timeframe of research projects. However, common sense knowledge can be misleading because information is often passed from one person to another without careful verification. In the context of Yangon and Myanmar where censorship and the lack of transparency have rendered rumors the main source of information, word-of-mouth can spread misinformation just as easily as reliable news. This point is particularly important in the effort to understand how the city of Yangon actually works because there are so many informal networks and ways of doing business.

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4 The report should be read with the first study, which focused on the physical forms and infrastructure in these blocks. This report will not repeat information such as designated historic buildings or flow of traffic.
5 As this research focused on three north-south blocks, the east-west streets are beyond the scope of discussion. However, the east-west streets were designed as arterial corridors at 160 feet in width.

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Na le hmu: Informal Systems and Informality

Indeed, one could argue that informality – both at the level of everyday people and at the various levels of government – is the system of Yangon. Informal connections usually termed as na le hmu in the Myanmar language have enabled Yangon to function despite formal regulations that have threatened to keep the city at a standstill. This dual track system – “official” government regulations and informal na le hmu transactions – makes it difficult to understand commerce and livelihood in Yangon. The intertwined and often opaque interactions between the two systems are shared by most forms of business in Yangon.

As evident in the news and shown in the block-specific analysis below, both government officials and everyday people participate in this dual track system through the collection and payment of various “fees” and acquiring permission to operate business without official documentation.

Informality is also important in this research because accurate information is not directly communicated. In Myanmar, one must earn a certain level of trust before one is privy to unfiltered information. This is particularly the case for topics such as income, which renders studies on economic livelihood a difficult if not self-defeating project. This research was designed to avoid direct questions about income. The logic of the research design is discussed in Appendix A.

Notes:
7 The Romanization of Myanmar has yet to be standardized internationally. Myanmar people use an ad hoc system that is often misleading for native English speakers. For example, the long “a” sound is rendered as “ar” and aspiration is not indicated. Among Myanmar scholars, the John Okell system is the default standard. In this report, we follow the convention of YHT staff who use the local Myanmar system despite the fact that the local Romanization often leads to mispronunciation of Myanmar words by non-Myanmar people.
8 Informal systems are a part of every city, whether they are in so-called “developed” or “developing” nations. This discussion regarding na le hmu is not meant as criticism. Na le hmu is integral to how Yangon actually works and must be recognized for its contribution. The degree of unpredictability in Yangon is uncommon in western countries and requires careful consideration. However, we must emphasize that unpredictability is not a sign of backwardness or lack of development because informal systems are in all cities. Our analysis indicates that many of the challenges for Yangon lie in the fact that there are few consistently applied policies or systems, thereby rendering informality (na le hmu) the dominant system. This dominant na le hmu system makes it difficult for everyone in the city, at all levels, to plan for and act on their futures.
III. Block-specific Analysis

As already noted, the three blocks are analyzed according to the following five categories:

**Character:** This category describes the type of street and broadly labels them as 1) residential, commercial (retail, food, service) and 2) upper-, middle- or lower-income. However, it must be emphasized that the labels of upper-, middle- and lower-income are not based on verified quantitative data but on respondent comments. Some respondents used the English word “class” while others used Myanmar words such as the-tay (rich people), a lout the ma (laborer), pinya shi (has education), si kan ma shi (no discipline) to describe the people in their streets and neighborhoods.

**Commerce:** This category describes the types of market activity in the block present and historically. In the mental map of Yangon residents, some townships or neighborhoods are known as zay kwet (market area). Those blocks commonly understood as belonging to a zay kwet are noted. This category also labels each block as lively (si kar de) or quiet (aye aye sey sey) according to Myanmar perceptions.

**Costs:** The recent history of Myanmar and the norms of Myanmar culture made direct questions about income unwise. Therefore, we attempted to gain a clearer understanding of livelihood through the lens of how much it costs to live in each particular neighborhood and asked the respondents to estimate how much money they would have to make to live comfortably. This approach was only partially successful because:

- Several respondents said they did not know the specifics of their various costs. Some even said they didn’t have an overall understanding.
- The informality and inconsistency of the various “fees” and taxes made it difficult for respondents to calculate their costs on a regular basis.
- The seasonal and unpredictable nature of some businesses made it difficult to calculate monthly and annual costs.

The above two conditions indicate that **many people conduct their lives on a day-by-day or case-by-case basis.** This degree of uncertainty has a significant impact on livelihood, making it difficult for the respondents to plan for the future. Their immediate and practical concerns forced them to focus on the moment, rendering aspirations about the future too abstract and uncontrollable to verbalize.

Although the research team could not gather specific and accurate data, a general impression with approximate figures was achieved.
**Connections**: Cities are composed of multiple, complex systems that are open to external influences such as trade, migration and climate change. This category identifies the systems that connect the block to its neighboring streets, to the township and the city as a whole. A key concern in this category is how the block functions relative to the various transportation, market and social systems in the city and whether the block can sustain itself at its current location with its current mix of businesses and inhabitants.

**Community**: Although community is a difficult concept to define, blocks or neighborhoods with a strong sense of community is clearly felt by its residents. This sense of belonging and mutual aid is often forgotten in quantitative research despite its importance in helping a group of people to live securely and comfortably in a place. Myanmar authors such as Nu Nu Yi (Inwa) have described the sense of displacement caused by changes in the built environment when former single-story homes that faced the street were replaced by multi-story apartments (*contract tike*).⁹ In her short stories, the family-like quality of neighborhood streets disappeared because the residents living in the new enclosed apartments rarely saw each other.

Within a purely economic framework, it is nearly impossible to assign a monetary value to neighborly connections but as evident in various research projects within Asia and beyond, informal neighborly assistance provides the support necessary to live and operate businesses in uncertain environments.

Given the limited timeframe of this project, the researchers set out to interview all residents and businesses on the ground floor followed up with in-depth interviews with select respondents. However, the surveys and interviews were presented as open invitations with no pressure to participate. Therefore, those who declined or were not home were noted as anonymous non-participants.

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⁹ It is important to note that the older way of building homes in Myanmar was for the homes to face a shared street. These streets not only functioned as spaces for transit but also as spaces for community. The significance of streets as public spaces is discussed extensively in urban design literature. In particular, whether a building faces or turns its back on the street is a significant factor in the liveliness and economic viability of a street. See list of books in Appendix B.
Upper block of Bogalay Zay Street. The street has little traffic and is considered to be uncluttered by residents. The YWCA (right) is a significant center for community building in this neighborhood. Photograph by Wing-yen Leung Li, used by permission.
Bogalay Zay Street (Upper Block)

Number of Respondents: Resident/Permanent (23), Vendor (8)

Character: This 50-foot wide street is largely residential and is described by its residents as shin deh (clear or uncluttered) and aye aye sey sey (quiet). Except for a brief period around three o’clock in the afternoon when classes are dismissed from the YWCA, there is little pedestrian or vehicular traffic, only local residents and business owners use this street. Outsiders, defined as those from other townships, come to attend class at YWCA or visit family and the few businesses on the street but do not use the block as a shortcut to other locations.

Based on the survey of the ground floor units and two interviews with businesses in the upper floors, this block has a mixture of Indian Muslim, Tayouk (long-term resident Chinese) and Myanmar residents with the Indian Muslim population being the majority.¹⁰

¹⁰ As evident in the ethno-religious conflicts from 2012 to the present, there are some tensions between the different populations in Yangon and Myanmar as a whole. The current situation and underlying causes will require extensive and sensitive research. The diversity in Yangon must be addressed in any discussion about the city and the use of these ethnic labels is unavoidable. However, we must emphasize that our use of these labels is not meant to categorize people along existing stereotypes. Those stereotypes must be continually re-examined for their relevance and potential harm. We use these labels because they are a part of the everyday reality in Yangon and constitute a part of how Yangon-tha and Yangon-thu conceive of their city. It is also important to know that there are populations such as the Indo-Myanmar and the Tayouk-ka-byā who are the children of intermarriage between the different ethnicities. Their situation in Yangon and Myanmar as a whole has yet to be studied.

Commerce: At present, the upper block of Bogalay Zay Street has little commerce and is generally quiet. About 10 years ago, it was known as a high-end tailor street where the best tailors were located. One of the best-known stores, Mermaid Smile, is still doing business but even they have suffered a decline due to the popularity of ready-made clothing. Several respondents commented on the fact that the low prices and availability of ready-made clothing have made tailor-made clothes uncompetitive.

Those on the ground floor stated that rent is increasing and that several businesses have failed because they could not afford the rent. The good condition of the buildings and uncluttered quality of the street also suggest that local residents have the financial capacity to maintain the colonial era buildings and build eight-story contract tike.

All of the respondents commented on the rising rent in the street, noting that many businesses have come and gone because they could not afford the rent. The rent for ground floor units is said to be between 600,000 to 800,000 kyat per month.

There are three restaurants in the block. At the northeast corner is a Shan noodle shop that
operates mainly on the sidewalk. They rent a portion of the dilapidated ground floor unit but that space is mainly for storage and cooking. They do not have a permanent kitchen and still cook on the temporary equipment typical for street vendors. They originally started their business on the northern side of Mahabandoola Street but were forced to relocate because the government did not allow selling on the sidewalk. Near the northwest corner is Aung Myanmar, a restaurant that was first at the corner but relocated because the government sold the corner building. The third restaurant, Suzuki, is a part of a successful higher-end chain. The branch on Bogalay Zay Street is the newest of three and has only been open for three months. The manager commented that the owners have invested significantly in renovating the interior and that the restaurant has yet to turn a profit. It is important to note that all three restaurants are close to the northern end of the block where the bus stop encourages walk-by traffic and customers.

There are also two snack shops in the northern half of the block but they are doing poorly. At the northeast corner facing Mahabandoola Street, there is one snack and sundry goods shop that is doing well. That is most likely due to the fact that it is located next to the bus stop.

In fact, there is a noticeable cluster of vendors that take advantage of the bus traffic on Mahabandoola Street including: three betel nut stalls, two DVD stalls, and two fruit, sugarcane juice, tea and salads sellers. Except for one betel nut seller at the northwestern corner of Bogalay Zay Street and Mahabandoola Street, most vendors appear to be just surviving. One of the DVD sellers is in constant debt because he takes out a monthly loan to operate his stall. Others said that sales have been bad.

As already noted, there is little walk-by or drive-through traffic on Bogalay Zay Street so there are very few restaurants or other services in the middle of the block. At the southern end of YWCA, there is one Yakine salad shop that operates on a daily basis and takes advantage of the YWCA student traffic. During the time when students are dismissed from class, a mobile Myanmar sweets vendor also appears.

There are also two micro-scale businesses that occupy the space underneath stairwells: a plumber and a sofa and curtain repair shop. The sofa repair shop has been in operation for 30 years and the two brothers say that their business continues to be sustainable. The plumber’s business is also sustainable. Occasionally, there is also a young man with a sewing machine who sets up on the sidewalk in the middle of the block but he appears to be inconsistent in his hours of operation.
At the southeastern corner of the Upper Block, there are two larger scale fruit vendors. They have a large selection of fruit and appear to be well established. They sell comparatively more expensive fruit and likely capitalize on the customers who shop in Gamonpwint, a department store chain. A couple of business owners in the block noted that the fruit at these stalls is more expensive than the same type of fruit available in Latha Township.

Finally, there are some higher-end businesses such as travel agencies, construction/engineering companies, two dentist clinics, two printing presses, one department store and a dance studio. These businesses cater to foreigners and others with money. Except for Gamonpwint, they do not rely on large volumes of traffic to succeed financially and might even have enough capital to sustain long term losses. For example, the only travel agency located on the ground floor, Astoria, noted that it usually takes three years before a travel agency can turn a profit. The owner is still building up his clientele but decided to locate his service on Bogalay Zay Street because there are foreigners who walk through the street. He is capitalizing on the location near the Secretariat and the traffic to Hola Dance Studio, which clearly targets foreigners and the rich. At Hola, the cost per dance class is US$10, which is beyond the means of the average Yangon resident.

Gamonpwint is a successful chain of department stores in Yangon with its headquarters in the Dagon Center area. This branch opened in 1998 and is seen as a higher-class retail chain that is still accessible to most local residents. Along with YWCA, it serves as a landmark for the street and is used as a reference point for navigating the nearby streets. (The historic value of the building was discussed in the Built Form report.)
Costs: Given the informality of market practices and the reluctance of Yangon residents to divulge their income, the figures provided by the respondents should be seen as rough estimates requiring additional research.

With this caveat in mind, many Bogalay Zay Street respondents said that rent for ground floor units was between 600,000 to 800,000 kyat. As for other costs, individual respondents quoted figures such as 7,000 to 15,000 kyat per day to buy food and 200,000 to 1,600,000 kyat per month to cover all costs.

Some of the discrepancy arises from the fact that many respondents owned the property they lived and/or worked in and many people included both business and living costs in their mental calculations. Other factors include the number of people per household, how costs are shared within the family/living unit and connections between home and business.

With such a broad range of numbers and the basic lack of statistical data in Myanmar, any quantitative analysis is potentially misleading. Therefore, in the broader consideration of cost-of-living in section IV, we discuss some common perceptions regarding the different levels of costs for living in the city.

However, it is worth noting that almost every business paid fees and taxes such as license, water, electricity, trash and signboard fees. Officially, these fees are regulated by YCDC but there is noticeable inconsistency in terms of the amount collected. For example, a restaurant and a construction company mentioned that fees fluctuated according to the government official and situation. Sometimes, additional money is required to facilitate the process.

Connections: As already noted, this research project emphasized interconnections and sought to understand the various systems that work through the city, broadly categorized as: transportation, market and social systems. It also sought to determine the degree to which the mix of residents, goods and services is balanced and self-sustaining.

Transportation: The Upper Block of Bogalay Zay Street is connected to the rest of the city through numerous bus lines that run on Mahabandoola and Merchant Streets. There are also taxis and private cars that service residents and the occasional visitor. However, the block itself is mostly protected from the high volume of traffic and noise on Mahabandoola and Merchant Streets.

Market: As the Upper Block is mostly residential with higher-end services and retail, residents walk to Bogalay Zay (Bogalay Market) in the Lower Block for their fruit, vegetables, meat and other daily necessities. Like many neighborhoods in Yangon, there is a local plumber to resolve the frequent
plumbing problems due to old pipes and water pumps. There is also a local locksmith and electrician in located in Bogalay Zay (market). Several local residents said that everything they need is on their street.

Social: For this block, the YWCA is a major connector that brings students and boarders from Yangon and its outlying regions. The large building hosts a wide variety of classes that cater to young and old including flower arranging, cooking, martial arts, computer and English classes. The YWCA has also become a local community center of sorts with the neighbors on Bogalay Zay Street, 41st, 42nd and 43rd supporting annual fundraising campaigns organized by the YWCA. Without the YWCA, the Upper Block would likely be extremely quiet, maybe even lifeless.

If and when the Secretariat is renovated, Bogalay Zay Street, as a street immediately south of the historic governmental complex, will likely become livelier. It has the right type of buildings and larger spaces for touristic services such as open-air cafes but until then, the YWCA is central to the vitality of the block.

Community: The Upper Block appears to be very settled with several residents stating that they have lived in the street for decades (10, 45, 50 and 55 years) and that their relationship with their neighbors is “like family (mi tha zu the lo be)” or “like kin (shwe myo the lo be)”. Even the businesses that have been on the block for a while say that there is a close relationship. For example, the young men in the sofa repair shop are able to borrow money from their neighbors if the need arises. This level of trust is not easily established in Yangon. Several respondents in the three blocks used the willingness to lend money as a measure of trust and sense of community.

The sense of community is so well established that some residents noticed the change in social dynamics after the new eight-story building was constructed on the east side. A dentist who owns a clinic on the ground floor and lives in the upper stories noted that once the number of units in his building increased, it was much harder to get to know everyone. He lamented the fact that each unit became very individualized, thereby making it harder to negotiate with one’s neighbors or influence their decisions. Each owner makes decisions independently regarding renovation or sales without any regard for his/her neighbors. However, at present, the upper block of Bogalay Zay Street is still a coherent residential community.
Lower block of 26th Street – dense urban fabric with cars parked along the eastern side thereby reducing the car traffic to a single lane.
26th Street (Lower Block)

Number of Respondents: Resident/Permanent (50), Vendor (10)

Character: The lower block of 26th Street feels like a commercial street despite the fact that the residential units in the upper stories greatly outnumber the businesses on the ground floor. This 30-foot wide street is packed with retailers, wholesalers and multi-story apartment buildings. Due to the narrower width of the street and the number of buildings above five stories tall, the street feels denser than Bogalay Zay and Latha Streets. However, with the tallest at eight stories, the buildings are still at a human scale and cast shadows to create pockets of relative coolness in the tropical climate of Yangon.

26th Street is commonly known as “Paint Street” and is a part of a zay kwet, (market district) which centers on Theingyi Zay (Theingyi Market). Respondents said that many of the units in 26th Street started out as warehouses for businesses located within Theingyi Zay. When the spaces in Theingyi Zay became too small, businesses relocated to 26th. The street is also known as a part of a long-standing hardware and homebuilding district that grew out of 25th Street. According to historian U Yi Sein, the area around 25th Street housed construction trades such as cement mixing during the colonial era.

For local, particularly Muslim residents, 26th Street is known for the Mamsa Sunni Mosque in the southern half of the block. On Fridays, there is a significant increase of traffic in the street because worshippers congregate for Friday prayers.

Commerce: Although 26th is known as “Paint Street”, there are a variety of businesses in the block including: household paint, pipe and pipe repair, hardware, fish nets, dyes and pigments, artist paint and even one guitar and mandolin retail shop.

A steady stream of customers and traffic run through the block with the afternoon being busier than the morning hours. As the street is only 30 feet wide and parking is permitted on the eastern side, car traffic is blocked whenever deliveries are made. Those delivering paint, fishing nets and other goods must stop in the road in front of the desired business and load or unload as quickly as possible. Some of the business owners mentioned that the dramatic increase in the number of cars and worsening traffic in Yangon has affected their business because it is too time consuming for their customers to drive to a busy zay kwet on a narrow street with no parking. However, during the study period, the street was generally passable except during the late afternoon (after 3:30pm). Indeed, the location in a busy zay kwet must still be beneficial for sales because the 50 or so businesses interviewed said they would remain in this block.
There are almost no vendors in the Lower Block of 26th Street except at the intersection between 26th and Mahabandoola Streets. This intersection is directly across from Theingyi Zay, one of the busiest markets in Yangon. Therefore, numerous vendors line the north and south sides of Mahabandoola Street and several have become permanent businesses despite the absence of permanent built facilities.

At the northwest corner of 26th Street, the faluda (Myanmar iced dessert drink) vendor has been doing business for more than 30 years and the Myanmar salad stand has been there for 20 years. Others selling Myanmar tea and mohinga (Myanmar fish noodle soup) have also successfully operated business for more than 20 years. Some such as the mohinga seller has established a name for herself and has a devoted clientele.

On Fridays when Muslims congregate for Friday Prayers, mobile vendors selling a variety of snacks appear in the block. Otherwise, there is only one snack shop tucked between parked cars on the east side of the street. The snack shop does not have much business. A few vendors who carry their goods on their heads or shoulders occasionally walk through the block but they do not seem to frequent 26th Street.

Costs: Again, the numbers provided by the respondents require further research. Of the 50 units surveyed, 10 rent their spaces but two out of this group said that their rent was not fixed (an extreme example of informality). The monthly rent for the others ranged from 40,000 to 500,000 kyat. This is because some of the spaces are very small (10’x12’) while others are about three times that size.

As for other costs, there was once again a considerable range: between 150,000 to 600,000 kyat to cover all costs per month. There are different sizes of businesses and families in 26th Street so this range is understandable even if it fails to provide further insights into livelihood.

It is worth noting that the respondents also mentioned the inconsistency in fees paid to government officials with one respondent saying, “There are two kinds of fees. You understand what I mean?”

For the vendors, three respondents answered the question about rent with the range being 25,000 to 36,000 kyat per month but were not forthcoming about to whom they pay their rent. As people who sell their goods on the sidewalk, they most likely pay fees to the different levels of the city government but most of them did not discuss these payments with us.

11 Interview with owner of shop on 17 November 2014.
They did however state that their cost-of-living per month is within the range of 120,000 to 300,000 kyats. As already noted, most respondents do not keep a careful record of their costs and tend to lump all costs into one large category.

Connections:

Transportation: Although none of the respondents mentioned the buses, the corner of 26th and Mahabandoola Streets has a high volume of bus traffic while the southern end has none. 26th Street ends on Merchant Street where Strand merges into Merchant Street, creating a dead-end of sorts. This break in the regular street grid of Yangon also makes 26th Street, a one-way street heading south to north, less useful as a thoroughfare. Unless someone needs to buy paint and the other supplies in the street, they would not travel on the lower block of 26th.

Finally, it is unlikely for customers to travel to 26th Street by bus because transporting paint and the other bulky goods sold on the street is cumbersome. However, the bus system does contribute to the liveliness at the northern end of the block.

Market: As an active commercial street, 26th Street has many business connections to its surrounding area and to Yangon as a whole. There is an immediate connection to Theingyi Zay and the zay kwet: the blocks between Shwebontha and Lannadaw Streets (east to west) and Anawyata and Mahabandoola Streets (north to south). All of the respondents commented that they can get everything they need in Theingyi Zay, from groceries to household supplies to wholesale products (see figure on page 32).

There is also a connection to Zawbwagyigon, a centralized hardware and construction supply market established by the government in the 1980s. The
paint suppliers on 26th Street were required to move to this distant market near the Mingaladon Airport, however many returned to their original location because their customers were unwilling to travel such long distances. Some respondents said that they still have wholesale outlets in Zawbwagyigon.

Social: In addition to the stated market connections, the street is connected to many other townships in Yangon because many of the business owners live in other locations. Except for the eight respondents who live in adjacent streets, others live in other townships such as Latha, Lanmadaw, Botataung, Pazundaung, Mayangone, Thinkankyun, Tamwe, Mingalartaungnyunt, and Hlaing Thaya. These business owners drive to work and expressed frustration regarding the traffic congestion and parking problems in the city.

Community: Findings regarding the sense of community on 26th Street are inconclusive because of the following reasons:

- The focus of this research was on the ground floor and all but six of the units surveyed were purely business establishments.
- Paint and other businesses were relocated to Zawbwagyigon by the government and permits for operating businesses on 26th were not officially issued by the government for several years. This means that any sense of a business community was broken by the relocation and that current businesses are likely still building their business relationships.

However, there is a discernible sense of community in the lower block of 26th Street. Those who walked up and down the block often greeted each other and stopped to chat. Those who live in the upper stories know the business operators below them and their relationships seem close enough that shop attendants greeted children returning home from...
school with phrases such as “pyan yawk bi lah”
(you’ve come back home).

In addition, there is a clear sense of community
centered on the Sunni mosque. While discussing the
difficulties of making a living, a respondent said that
for several months of the year, he makes little or no
money. Like many Yangon residents, he must work
around the seasonal nature of his business.
However, unlike some respondents, he has a
support structure through the Sunni Mosque. Every
month, he gives some money to the mosque. If and
when he needs money, the mosque will provide the
necessary funds. Further research is necessary but
local Muslim residents have clearly self-organized to
overcome the financial uncertainties in their lives.

The call for prayer is easily heard in many
neighborhoods in Yangon so this religiously based
sense of community is not unique to 26th Street.
What is worth noting is that while this street that is
usually labeled as Muslim, there are other business
owners such as Tayouk (Myanmar-Chinese) and
Hindu Indian.12 This speaks to the complexity of
ethno-religious relations in Yangon and reminds us
to pay close attention to details and differences
rather than generalizing about religious tensions.

12 For the sake of brevity, the term Myanmar-Chinese is used even though
this translation of Tayouk is misleading. See footnote 9 above.
Lower block of Latha Street – low level of pedestrian and car traffic. Photograph by Yeukyi Li, used by permission
Latha Street (Lower Block)

Number of Respondents: Resident/Permanent (28), Vendor (6)

Character: Located in Tayouk Tan (Chinatown), Latha Street often serves as shorthand for Chinatown and is known as 100-foot Street, the most prestigious downtown property, among the Myanmar-Chinese. This broad street was once the exclusive domain of rich Chinese merchant families with Chan Ma Phee and other elites listed in the *Twentieth Century Impressions of Burma*, owning properties. Even after decades of neglect, the shophouse-style estates and association halls on Latha still stand out as exceptional architecture. Latha Street is seen as prime real estate and has a strong sense of architectural formality.

Based on incomplete data, it appears that the properties on the lower block of Latha Street are still in the hands of old money. These owners are disinclined to sell or rent, thereby keeping the block in economic, social and physical stasis. Most of the respondents said that the lower block has stayed the same for decades with the exception being the gradual increase in the number of businesses since about 2011. In the past two to three years, a few eateries, hair salons and clothing stores have opened for business. Prior to the opening of these establishments, the businesses on Lower Latha Street were inward facing and did not require passerby traffic to succeed. These new businesses have begun to alter the character of the block by making the northern end a more outward-facing commercial street. However, the block as a whole remains mainly residential and exclusive. Most front facades have metal bars and gates and these gates are mostly closed and locked.

Commerce: Aside for the eateries, hair salons, clothing stores and a few attached street-side sellers, the businesses on Lower Latha Street are higher-end services such as import/export, transshipment, construction and banking. They are generally not open to the public and operate behind closed doors. Indeed, without speaking with the company staff, it is generally not possible to discern the types of businesses operating within.

During the colonial era, large companies that traded in beans and pulses were located on Latter (now Latha) Street. This concentration of wholesale trade continued until the government required all wholesalers to relocate to Bayinnaung in the late 1980s. However, the trade of some agriculture products such as palm oil have returned to Lower Latha Street.
At the northern end of the block, there are two large tea and snack shops on the eastern side. Cherry Mann, a Muslim establishment, is famous for its danbauk and paratha, which draws customers from all over Yangon. King, a Myanmar tea and Shan baosi (steamed stuffed buns) shop, is a branch of a successful chain. There is also a Myanmar food restaurant that has been doing business for 10 years. On the northwestern side, the Hana Sushi Shop, is an example of increasing Japanese influence in post-2011 Myanmar. All of these eateries cater to those with disposable income.

Similarly, the two hair salons and two clothing stores in the northern half of the block target middle-class consumers. Their facades and interiors are perceived of as modern with bold colors, clean lines and lots of glass. There are also a few mobile phone companies that should be seen as growth from the more established mobile phone market in Upper Latha Street.

Given the sense of formality and exclusivity in Lower Latha Street, it is unsurprising that there are very few vendors. In fact, the hustle and bustle of sales on Mahabandoola Street rarely filters into Lower Latha Street. Except at the northern corners at the intersection with Mahabandoola Street, the block is quiet.

At and near the northern corners, a few built-in, regular and mobile stalls sell medicine, sundry goods, toys, snacks and fruit.
These vendors were generally unwilling to answer our questions. However, based on visual analysis, the built-in sellers seem to be operating sustainable businesses while the mobile vendors seem to lead more precarious lives.

Near the middle of the block on the western side, there is one Myanmar salad vendor who is doing well. He sells lunch and snacks to the government staff in the Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation. He has located his business in front of an unoccupied ground floor and is able to keep his costs to a minimum by doing business unofficially. There is also a father and daughter team who sell lunch at the southeastern corner. It is unclear how well they are doing financially.

At night, Lower Latha Street serves as parking space for the Mahabandoola Night Market.

**Costs:** The respondents in Lower Latha Street were generally unwilling or unable to provide information about the cost for doing business or living in the block. Many owned their ground floor units and those who live in the unit tend to own the entire building. Their reluctance to divulge information is understandable given their wealth and the recent history of Myanmar. Others who answered our survey questions were employees who did not know about operational costs.

The vendors who spoke to us were similarly vague about costs. A few quoted paying 100 kyat per day to local officials and noted that storage for their equipment was 7500 kyat per month for spaces on 21st Street.

**Connections:** As Latha Street was and remains a street of the wealthy, the residents and business owners have uncommon connections that reach the most exclusive estates in Windermere/Golden Valley and far beyond to Taiwan, Canada, the United States and other countries. Two resident families said that they have obtained citizenship in Canada and Taiwan and noted that most other families on the street have lived overseas, not only in Asia but further afield in Australia, North America and Europe. This means that livelihood in Lower Latha Street is a very different question from most other streets in Yangon.

It is commonly understood that only those with special and/or international connections are able to do import/export trade and large-scale business. This would seem to be true for Lower Latha even though we were not able to get direct answers. At the national and regional scale, the palm oil company must have established networks within Myanmar in order to plant, harvest, process and sell palm oil.
Transportation: At the city scale, Lower Latha Street is not dependent on the local transportation network. Its residents and businesses have private cars and until the recent surge in the number of cars, they were able to travel throughout the city with few impediments. Since 2012, they have been subjected to the worsening traffic in the city and several respondents commented on the ongoing congestion and parking problems.

Market: The owners of larger businesses did not comment on market connections. For smaller businesses such as the clothing stores, they traveled to places such as Bangkok and Singapore to purchase stock. For micro-businesses such as the medicine stall at the northeast corner of Lower Latha Street, they purchased supplies from wholesalers at Theingyi Zay and Mingalar Zay.

For household goods and groceries, the respondents shop at Theingyi Zay, Than Zay and the wet market on 18th Street.

Social: Because the respondents were generally less willing to talk, we are unable to comment on social connections. As already noted, Lower Latha Street appears to house wealthy families and these families do not seem to socialize on the street. Their networks are more private.

Based on previous research in Tayouk Tan, there are significant social connections based in the Chinese associations in the lower block. However, these social relationships are focused on specific associations such as Kien Teik, a brotherhood, not on the street itself. The architecture of the brotherhood and native place associations are prominent because the buildings are topped with halls of worship that share the same typology as Chinese temples but are in fact ancestral halls.

Community: Other than the tightly knit relationships in the brotherhoods, native place associations and other Chinese organizations, Lower Latha Street does not appear to support a strong sense of community. The wealthy residents and business owners seem to lead more independent and exclusive lives.
IV. The Three Blocks within Yangon’s Urban Fabric

Based on the hierarchical urban plan implemented by the British\textsuperscript{13} and the current characteristics of the three specified blocks, the streets would seem to fall into three different categories:

1. Lower 26\textsuperscript{th} Street: 30-foot, middle-income, residential
2. Upper Bogalay Zay Street: 50-foot, upper-middle-income, residential and commercial
3. Lower Latha Street: 100-foot, high-income, residential and commercial

Comments from the respondents suggest that these categories coincide with different levels of status or prestige with Latha being seen as the tay (rich person) street or prime real estate.

However, as already evident in our analysis, these blocks break from the above three categories significantly. Within the British colonial plan, streets that are 30-feet wide were imagined as residential\textsuperscript{14} but Lower 26\textsuperscript{th} Street is actually the most active and vibrant commercial street of the three blocks studied. In contrast, the 50- and 100-foot wide streets are quiet and have several empty or closed ground floor units.

Residents and Resident Businesses

Although the 30-foot wide streets were not specifically designed to promote trade, the lower status of 26\textsuperscript{th} Street has made it more affordable and therefore more accessible for local entrepreneurs. In comparison to the 6,000,000 to 8,000,000 kyat per month for ground floor units in Upper Bogalay Zay Street, store spaces in Lower 26\textsuperscript{th} Street can be rented for 200,000 to 500,000 kyat per month. Some units have been sub-divided into three commercial spaces and are available for 40,000 to 45,000 kyat/month. These lower prices are usually for smaller lots but small and start-up businesses often do not need large spaces. Indeed manageable costs enable micro and small businesses to grow incrementally and sustainably.

Interviews in Lower 26\textsuperscript{th} Street and Latha Township yielded several stories about how some people started out as roadside vendors who then gradually made enough money to rent a space in Theingyi Zay and then became successful enough to expand to an

\textsuperscript{13} For discussions about classes of lots and the spatial hierarchy of Rangoon, see Maxim, “Resemblance in External Appearance: The Colonial Project in Kuala Lumpur and Rangoon,” 51-70. Pearn also discusses the relative prestige of different streets in History of Rangoon.

\textsuperscript{14} “Resemblance in External Appearance: The Colonial Project in Kuala Lumpur and Rangoon.”
independent shop. One respondent said that in the 1960s and 70s, young men set up roadside stalls along Anawyata Street to fix transistors. Some of them were very successful and are now the owners of the biggest electronics and stereo system shops in Upper Bo Ywe Street.

In comparison, the bigger size, greater formality, and higher cost of the units in Upper Bogalay Zay Street and Lower Latha Street are disincentives or barriers for most local entrepreneurs. As already noted, many businesses have failed in Upper Bogalay Zay Street and few businesses can even enter Lower Latha Street. There are of course different segments in the market, from the exclusive to the mainstream, but considerations for improved livelihood in Yangon should prioritize the broadest base of people, which are likely at the lower end of the income spectrum.

While Lower 26th Street is lower in status than Upper Bogalay Zay and Lower Latha Streets, it is still a well-off street in comparison with the city of Yangon as a whole. One only has to compare the Lower and Upper blocks of 26th Street to see the relative prosperity in the lower block. Therefore, this study of the three designated blocks only provides limited case studies for livelihoods in better-off neighborhoods. It cannot speak for livelihood in Yangon in general.

However, it is important to note that all three blocks are mixed-use, with a combination of commercial and residential and a variety of industries from retail to service to light industry. Most units were purely commercial or residential but the business owners often lived or worked within the same township or nearby townships.

Cost-of-living

To remedy the limitations of this block-specific study, the research team spoke with Yangon residents in other blocks and townships to estimate cost-of-living in the city.

It is important to note that when queried, every respondent calculated cost-of-living according to costs per day including items such as meals, Myanmar tea, snacks, betel nut and other habitual consumption. Everyone commented on the different ranges of expenditure available in the city such as one could eat lunch for 500 kyat, 1,500 kyat, 3000 kyat or even higher. No respondent was absolute in offering his or her calculations but were able to make educated guesses. Most respondents offered calculations based on an average size of four to five members in a family. The ranges provided are:

- Laborers / vendors: 300,000 kyat/month
- Lower income: 300,000 to 500,000 kyat/month
- Lower-middle income: 500,000 to 700,000 kyat/month
- Middle income: 700,000 to 1,000,000 kyat/month

All respondents emphasized that it is difficult to estimate accurately but spoke with more confidence about the lowest levels of income because they have heard how little laborers make per day. They also commented that rent, education and medical costs are the most burdensome. As is widely known, rent is paid in six month and

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15 In addition to the three designated blocks, other interviews were conducted with business owners in Latha Township. These interviews were based on contacts established through previous research, and these informants were contacted to gain a better understanding of livelihood in Latha Township.
annual sums, which is an extreme burden on those with little income. Education can also consume large portions of a family’s budget because most aspects of schooling require additional fees. Lastly, the cost of medicine and medical fees was always mentioned because many families have experienced hardship due to illness in the family. For considerations of livelihood in Yangon and Myanmar as a whole, medical care should be conceived of as a regular and significant cost.

Vendors

Although this study also sought to understand how street vendors make a living, we were only able to gain a surface-level understanding because the selected higher-income streets have relatively few vendors and do not serve as storage or living spaces for vendors.

A few vendors at the corner of Latha and Mahabandoola Streets stated that they store their carts on 21st Street. Whereas streets such as 21st and 37th have vending carts parked along the street and vendors who live in their roof-top units, the specific blocks of this research are largely free of vendors.

To better understand the livelihood and living condition of vendors, it was necessary to interview people outside of the specified blocks. The author called on informants from previous studies. Daw San San Htwe and Ko Aung Soe Naing also provided insights as long-term residents of Yangon. 37th Street is an example of a more complete system of vendor livelihood and is discussed briefly here.

It is commonly known that na le hmu is the de facto market system in Yangon and that street vendors must manage the informality to survive. Based on the limited findings, vendors in a given block or area know who they must pay and how much they must pay even if that person does not show up in uniform or in his official capacity. As a respondent on 37th Street put it, “People pay the fees to the official when he is not in uniform, and when the official is about to come in uniform for an official inspection, people know they must not to be there. So, people are paying for information.”

Similarly, vendors have agreements (na le hmu) among themselves. Within a given block, vendors know who sells where and respect each other’s territories. Those who are very well established are thought to “own” their businesses, which include the parts of the sidewalk they occupy. Profitable businesses can even sell their business and location to others. Based on hearsay, some say that well-known vendors in the most popular market areas can sell their businesses for 30 million kyat despite the fact that the sale comes with no future guarantees regarding the right to the space.

This dual track system – “official” government regulations and informal na le hmu transactions – makes it difficult to understand an important aspect of Yangon’s commerce but this complexity is shared by most forms of business in Yangon. The informality of vendor commerce is just more apparent because they take place out in the open, in public space.

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16 Interview on Nov 10, 2014.
17 Interview with large business owner in Latha Township on 10 Dec 2014. However, four other respondents commented on this topic and all quoted sale prices of over one million.
Examples of vendor livelihood on 37th Street

Vending cart parked in front of abandoned ground floor unit.

Added-on rooftop units – rented by vendors.
However, perceptions of what is private and public in Myanmar culture need to be studied and understood in the local context. Based on the everyday actions of Myanmar people, there appears to be a large in-between zone between public and private space in Yangon. People still shower on the street and set their chairs out in the evening to chat with neighbors.

In the context of cities, public space is defined as 1) a space constructed and maintained by the government for public good, and within which 2) citizens who share the public space are obligated to follow common laws for the good of all. This usually includes public rights-of-way (streets and sidewalks) and public parks and plazas.

Parking along public streets is usually considered a public service and most streets in Yangon have more-or-less formalized parking areas. In order to accommodate the great increase in the numbers of cars, the Yangon city government recently reduced the width of sidewalks on many streets to increase parking space.

18 The author is aware of a research project undertaken by a Myanmar student who is investigating shared spaces in traditional Myanmar culture. This research is in progress but the student is documenting how farmers share huts in rice fields. Farmers clean up after themselves and provide basic necessities (water, cooking materials, etc.) for the convenience of other farmers. This will be an important case to consider in formulating definitions of what is shared and what is public in Myanmar culture and the responsibility of the government in supporting this kind of common/shared space. In countries such as China and Vietnam, the term “public space” has been adopted without due consideration of how their people actually live together and the social norms that enable them to live together collaboratively.

Parking: Parking on the major streets of Yangon is contracted out to private individuals or companies through a tender system. Those interested bid to pay the government a set fee per month and have the authority to operate their parking businesses as they see fit. It is a rent-seeking system with no apparent government oversight and operates like a private enterprise rather than a public service.

Sidewalks: Sidewalks would appear to be an indisputable public space under the responsibility of the government. However, the sidewalks in Yangon are often unsafe and barely walkable with teetering planks of cement or wood and open sewers. In addition, vendors occupy parts of the sidewalk to sell their goods, effectively using public space for private business.

Parks: Portions of parks such as Kandawgyi, Inya Lake and People’s Park have been subcontracted to private businesses to establish amusement parks and other fee-based entertainment spaces. This system of managing parks would suggest that parks are not seen as spaces for public good but for private consumption.

These so-called “public spaces” are essential for livelihood and livability but the current management and uses of these spaces suggest that the following issues remain unresolved:

- What is public good and public space?
- Who has the authority to affect the forms and uses of these spaces?
- Who has the responsibility of maintaining public spaces?

Further research is necessary but in the context of livelihood, the respondents made the following comments.
Sidewalks

In talking about their specific blocks, almost no respondent mentioned the problem of sidewalks. Most found their blocks walkable with those in Upper Bogalay Zay Street saying their street was generally “shin deh” (clear, unobstructed). The only exception came from business owners in Lower Latha Street who complained about the fact that despite their own initiative, they could not repair the broken sidewalks in front of their homes and businesses. The local residents had waited months for the municipal government to repair the sidewalk that government contractors had broken through to access the water pipes below. After they began their self-funded repairs, the municipality told them they had no authority to fix the sidewalk.

When directly queried about sidewalks, respondents commented about the problems on streets such as Mahabandoola and Anawyata. They said that there was no space for them to walk anymore because:

- The municipality has narrowed sidewalks, cutting their width in half, to make space for parking
- The number of vendors has increased dramatically in the past few years
- Vendors are now using tents with four posts that occupy more space than the umbrellas that were once more common

All of these factors combined have made walking on busy streets very challenging and the respondents wished for clear paths for pedestrians. However most respondents also volunteered that they understand the difficulties faced by street vendors and that vendors are only doing what they must to survive. They did not suggest removing street vendors but wanted clear and enforced regulations for street vending. Almost all respondents commented on the convenience of being able to buy most of their food and daily necessities on the street and described the zay kwet (market area) around Theingyi Zay as “a sone beh” (having everything or everything one needs).

Markets (as centers for living)

The convenience of shopping at local markets is commonly seen as a benefit. The three neighborhoods examined in this research are all adjacent to or near long-established wet and dry markets that enable residents to meet their daily needs within an easily walkable two to three blocks (see walkscore.com website in Appendix B).

The ability to buy small quantities of perishable goods on a daily basis was essential before electricity was consistently supplied and before households could afford refrigerators. Now that most downtown residents have reliable access to both, shopping on a daily basis is less essential. However, daily shopping remains the norm for Yangon residents and frequent visits to their local markets are a part of how they live in the city. They go to their local morning wet markets to buy vegetables, fish and meat, and pick up fruit and other food on their way home in the afternoon. These daily trips set a particular rhythm to life in the city and can be considered as one of Yangon’s unique characteristics (compared to other cities internationally).
Some historic markets and market districts in downtown Yangon, shown with designated study blocks.
Local wet and dry markets and markets such as Theingyi Zay constitute centers for social life in Yangon. The daily interactions in the markets not only enable Yangon residents to acquire basic necessities, they also knit the various people together into an urban community. The sellers come to know their buyers and the buyers gradually develop relationships with the vendors, selecting those who can be trusted to give them the best products at the best prices. This kind of relationship is much rarer in so-called developed countries where people shop in supermarkets and chain stores. Scholars such as Jane Jacobs, Jan Gehl, Leonie Sandercock among others have argued that these societies are poorer for it.\footnote{See list for further reading in Appendix B.}

Although Yangon is changing very fast, the local markets can continue to foster a sense of community in order to maintain a living heritage. The wet and dry markets and the services located in or around them such as plumbing and sofa repair might not be pretty but they fulfill the practical needs of the surrounding residents.

In many cities around the world, these markets are being maintained, upgraded or re-established as a way to reconnect growers, suppliers, service providers, and consumers. Many of these markets have become critical urban food suppliers, important centers of city life, and tourist destinations as well.\footnote{See Appendix B for a brief discussion regarding Pike Place Market in Seattle, Washington and web sites for current discussions on great public spaces and great cities.}

Most of Yangon’s neighborhoods (at the ward and township levels) are largely self-sufficient microcosms that enable their residents to fulfill their daily needs within a few city blocks, thanks to their local markets. This is one of Yangon’s key strengths that should be maintained. One only has to look at the continued success of Bogyoke Market to see the potential for a historic market to serve both residents (albeit the richer segment of the population) and tourists.
V. Livelihood and Heritage Protection

As evident in the growing literature about heritage and heritage-making, there are many different ways to define heritage. Scholars and practitioners agree that the business of heritage protection has tended to place too much emphasis on material objects (the tangible), thereby neglecting the importance of social and historical relationships and practices (the intangible). However, the tendency to objectify is difficult to overcome because human relationships and history are constantly changing, rendering any effort to document or protect intangible heritage a work against the basic nature of life and time. It must be recognized that the significance and contradictions in heritage protection make it a complicated and contested field.

This contestation is particularly significant with respect to livelihood because heritage conservation has generally been the practice of the elite. Everyday people who struggle to make ends meet do not have the luxury of pondering heritage. However, everyday people in many historic cities have lamented the loss of their traditional environments after heritage buildings and historic districts were knocked down to make room for “modern” development. Although this has yet to happen among the populace in Yangon, the stories of Nu Nu Yi (Inwa) suggest that some Yangon residents have noticed the loss of community in their city.

As Yangon faces so many challenges and poverty is still a pressing issue, heritage protection that takes into consideration all segments of the population will be extremely important albeit difficult. This 26-day research project was only able to scratch the surface of what Yangon residents value in their built environment but it is possible to suggest steps forward in terms of what could encourage economic growth for as many segments of the population as possible.

As noted above, *zay kwet* (market districts) and markets such as Theingyi Zay and Bogalay Zay are known by Yangon residents as generators of income or places with more sales transactions. In fact, owners of large businesses in Latha Township proudly proclaimed their township is the most vibrant economically. As proof, one respondent said, “Just look at the number of banks in our township. You don’t see this many banks anywhere else. Why is this? It is because we have the largest number of transactions.”

The multi-leveled sales transactions in and around Theingyi Zay can be defined as ‘living heritage’ that takes place within historic market buildings and districts and continually breathes life into these spaces. This heritage is living because:

- The market buildings and surrounding area *support* the various modes of livelihood: mobile vendors, built-in street-side stalls, stalls within the markets, shop fronts in surrounding streets and larger businesses within the *zay kwet*.
- The market activities keep the buildings and neighborhood alive through their daily activities.
- These various market activities are engines of growth for the Yangon economy because they provide the space and

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21 Interview on 24 November 2014.
opportunities for small-scale entrepreneurs to take calculated and incremental risks in order to grow their businesses.

- The relatively low entry requirement into this multi-layered market creates a self-sustaining cycle of growth that brings new businesses in as established businesses move out in order to expand.

As already evident in the protection and renovation of historic markets and market buildings in cities such as Seattle, Boston and London, capitalizing on existing market vitality is a well-tested and successful way to protect both tangible and intangible heritage (please see Appendix B for web links to successful cases). This approach to heritage is notable because it has the capacity to protect a complex set of interacting systems that include numerous social interactions and buildings. By placing complex human-built environment interactions at the foreground, protected historic markets remain active, everyday spaces that are welcoming to outsiders such as tourists rather than becoming lifeless museums.

Markets such as Theingyi Zay have the potential to become vibrant and attractive historic markets through careful renovation of their colonial era market buildings and sensitive regulations that foster small-scale entrepreneurship. The numerous cases listed in Appendix B show that this approach has been successfully implemented in many cities. They have become exemplars for economically viable and self-sustaining heritage protection because this place- and people-sensitive approach has the ability to keep the market district physically and socially intact. By improving on the structure and amenities in these markets, local residents are able to carry on with their everyday lives and thereby maintain the unique characteristics of their neighborhoods.

With the current rapid pace of urbanization that has outpaced infrastructural upgrades and superseded comprehensive planning, heritage protection has the added challenge of having to promote economic growth if it is to be seen as relevant and valuable by Yangon’s residents. This is the catch-22 of trying to save Yangon’s historic architecture before it is knocked down in the name of progress and modernization. Most residents have not had the time or luxury to consider what they value in their built environment because their previous decades of existence were focused on subsistence and because their lives were so politically and economically constrained that few would venture to have opinions about anything beyond their immediate families and homes. Even well-off respondents placed pragmatic concerns such as immediate
return-on-investment before social and cultural concerns. Although we asked respondents what they think is important or valuable in their built environment, no one was able to answer the question. That kind of question arises later, after people have acquired enough economic, social and political security to consider the non-essential.
VI. The Future of Yangon – Modern Again?

It is now commonly known that Yangon was one of the most modern cities in colonial Southeast Asia and that the architecture in Yangon’s downtown core was built to represent British colonial modernity. In fact, in the eyes of British officials it was “the only large Indian city which has grown up on a scientific plan” and was rated as “a study of modern urban development”.22 Downtown Rangoon under the British was indeed orderly and sanitary and in the memory of elderly educated elite, remained breezy and pleasant in the 1950s and 60s.

No respondent reminisced about the quality of their streets during this 26-day project, but in previous research respondents over the age of 50 recalled the airy clean streets of their youth and one even said he and his friends played in the storm drains under the sidewalks because the water was so clean.23

Given the limited scope of this research, it is unclear how many people have pleasant memories of Yangon or if they have a special attachment to city. It does seem like native residents remember better times when the city was cleaner and less crowded. Four respondents talked about how clean the streets were under General Ne Win. They said that the trash collectors diligently collected trash on their streets and in response, the residents helped to keep their streets clean. In their assessment, the strict discipline of the Ne Win government ensured that trash collectors dutifully performed their tasks and everyday people followed the rules. They often used the words “si kan shi de (having discipline)” to describe the enforcement of rules in the 1950s and 60s. That a part of the Ne Win era is already being thought of in a positive light indicates the degree of dissatisfaction in contemporary Yangon.

Besides the dirty, littered streets, respondents complained about traffic congestion and parking problems. Everyone who commented on these issues agreed that too many import licenses have been given out and that new controls are need. They also criticized the decision to narrow sidewalks in order to create parking spaces and the futility of building flyovers. In the words of one respondent, “Every flyover creates more traffic jams. If you look at Pyay Road, the flyovers have made the road so congested that it is blocked all the way down to Sanchaung.”24

Everyone agrees that there are too many cars in Yangon but most also see cars as a symbol of modernity. Car ownership is the globalized image of financial success and individual achievement. However, Yangon residents are already experiencing the heavy cost of this imported dream and criticize those who own more than one car.

In particular, respondents pointed out that car brokers (those who buy and sell cars in order to generate profit) are contributing to parking problems by parking their multiple cars on public streets. For example, business owners on Latha Street pointed out cars

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23 Interviews from doctoral fieldwork in January and November 2007 and September 2008.

24 Interview with owner of electronics store in Latha Township on 17 November 2014.
layered with dust, stating that those car owners are using a public street as their warehouse while they are awaiting the next sale. The speculative buying of cars is an old trade in Yangon that has become more predatory since import licenses were made broadly available in 2011.

Cars are only one example of the contradictory effects of modernity and modernization. Individual cars promise more autonomy for Yangon’s residents while simultaneously trapping them in Yangon’s congestion. The convenience of walking through downtown blocks has been replaced by the jockeying for space between pedestrians and street vendors as their sidewalks are cut in half to make room for parking spaces. This path towards a so-called modern, developed city has been undertaken by many cities to their detriment. Cities such as Los Angeles, a car dominated ‘World City’, are often described as soulless and alienating. Urban planners around the world recognize the social and environmental problems of car-oriented societies and are trying to re-humanize cities by making them pedestrian and bike-centered places for social interaction.

“Modern” Rangoon as built by the British colonial government was a human-scaled, pedestrian-friendly city and through the vagaries of history, the Yangon of today remains largely a human-scale city. Perhaps it is the fate of Yangon to have remained in stasis – to have its built environment unaltered for five decades – so that its colonial-imposed modernity is once again at the leading edge of city design. The most lauded cities of today such as Copenhagen, New York, Melbourne, Paris and Vancouver are held up as exemplars because they have 1) maintained large sections of their old city fabric, which were and remain at the human scale, 2) have rehabilitated old lots and infrastructure to create public spaces, and 3) have prioritized pedestrians, bicyclists, and transit over car transportation.

Indeed many urban planners and designers state that the ‘Future City’ is the bike and pedestrian city. These ways of moving around a city promote better physical health in the residents, encourage more social interactions, are more environmentally sustainable and are likely more economically resilient.

At present, Yangon’s human-scaled, pedestrian-oriented urban design supports a diversity of livelihoods from permanent offices and retail to informal street vending. This lively mixture of commerce is one of Yangon’s strengths that can be harnessed for economic growth. As already stated, several respondents talked about the incremental success of businesses that grew from street side vending to permanent shops. These success stories provide hope for future entrepreneurs and pathways to improve their own livelihoods. If policies could be set up to foster this existing entrepreneurial spirit, the financial success of these businesses would contribute to the success of Yangon overall.

**Next Steps**

Of course, further research is necessary to understand the informal systems at work in the city and to identify viable regulations that set clear and enforceable rules without suffocating micro and small businesses. Yangon could become a leader in establishing policies that support local SME (small and medium enterprise) growth while simultaneously attracting foreign direct investment. Unlike China, it does not have become the sweatshop to the world.
This research and report provide a glimpse into how the city of Yangon actually operates and the various economic forces at play. As already noted, the informal economy is a driving economic force and needs to be considered as a strength with undeniable challenges and contradictions.

It will be important to consider the definitions of and practices in public space because the informal economy largely happens on the streets. Different groups of people such as the vendors who share a sidewalk have come to an informal but stable agreement about what each person is responsible for and how he or she should act. These agreements, however, have not resulted in a shared understanding amongst all the various users of the street, and in particular between the government and the people. What are the responsibilities of the pedestrian, the local resident, the ward officer, township officer and the city government? A few respondents joked that there are plenty of good policies in Myanmar, in fact too many. They also ask, what is the use of policies if they are not enforced or no one follows them? Therefore, to protect the liveliness, the living heritage of Yangon, one must first understand how the city actually works, the rules of daily life, before setting more policies.

In addition to investigating how things work on the street, it will be important to connect the fluid forces of economic transactions to the built environment, even if most business transactions happen outside the buildings themselves. Indeed, buildings form the critical edges and borders of public spaces, and the interactions between buildings and streets are essential for supporting liveliness, livability and livelihood.

The Yangon Heritage Trust has begun this process with the Built Form Study and this current report but these are first steps that will require further verification and study. Basic information such as address number and property size need to be clarified through as-built drawings and conversations with the local residents. As Yangon residents already know, there have been different systems for property addressing over the years, and even within a single block different addressing systems are used. After the building and property survey is verified, additional layers of data such the types of businesses discussed in this report can be layered onto the map. At present, the information gathered through this research cannot be deployed as valid data and should not be mapped to specific buildings or the city as a whole without further research.

Since 2013, YCDC has undertaken a number of initiatives to better understand the city through various workshops and research projects. Yangon is extremely complex with many opaque layers. Although much of the data has to be built from the ground up, Yangon can learn from cities around the world that have developed standards for types and formats of municipal datasets. Tools such as GIS (Geographic Information Systems) help to manage and visualize this data and can help create short and long-term strategies for growth and improvement of livability. Most cities of Yangon’s size have dedicated full-time municipal teams to gather, organize, and manage GIS datasets. Links to examples of these datasets are provided in Appendix B.

Although imperfect, YCDC’s Urban Planning Unit could begin to untangle the complexity of Yangon by correlating municipal records (licensing, signboard fees, taxes, other property information) with an accurate building and property survey. It is commonly recognized
that not all businesses are recorded by YCDC but this process would provide a solid foundation for documenting the various forms of livelihood, where they take place in the city and finally, to check the accuracy existing data. Combing through the records in the various departments in YCDC would assist in centralizing and collating the various sets of data held by the municipal government. This process would also help discover ways of organizing the data in order to make them usable and useful for planning a better Yangon.

References


Appendix A: Research Design and Method

Cities are extremely complex and open systems and any research into contemporary phenomena such as livelihood must:

1. Approach the research question from as many perspectives as possible through appropriate research methods such as:
   a) quantitative surveys
   b) qualitative/open-ended interviews
   c) spatial analysis of the uses of streets and other urban spaces
   d) behavioral analysis of social interactions
   e) discourse analysis of words used to describe the city
2. Recognize the limitations of the research as it is trying to capture live, changing phenomena
3. Ground the research in previous scholarship
4. Incorporate the views and insights of local inhabitants and experts

It is well known that there are no reliable and available databases regarding the demographics of Yangon, types and number of businesses, tax records or other statistics and that researchers must develop a certain level of trust before unfiltered information will be divulged. As noted in the body of the report, the prevalence of informal practices, the recent history of Myanmar and the norms of Myanmar culture made direct questions about income unwise.

Therefore, the research team attempted to gain a clearer understanding of livelihood indirectly through a combination of the five research methods listed above.

As this research could not be built upon existing sets of data or prior findings, the project had to first establish a base for analysis through a broad survey. This survey should be seen as a pilot project that could be refined for future research. It cannot stand alone as a valid social science survey.

With this limitation in mind, the pilot survey approached the topic of livelihood through:
- cost of living
- perceptions of local markets/commerce
- sense of community and mutual support
- differences between more permanent residents/resident businesses and less permanent vendors

(The two types of questionnaires – resident and vendor – are provided in Appendix C.)

Furthermore, due to the limited timeframe of 26 days, the team targeted the ground floor units. The local research assistants and the lead researcher agreed that approaching residents and businesspeople in the upper floors without explicit invitations would be too intrusive. Instead, the team sought out respondents in the upper floors who felt comfortable participating in the research. These respondents were asked open-ended questions through an interview rather than the survey questions.
It is important to point out the methodological differences between surveys and interviews. Strictly speaking, surveys are supposed to generate comparable data that is neutral and representative. Therefore, a valid survey must have a sufficiently large number of respondents, be unbiased in the selection of respondents through random sampling, and account for the diversity in the respondent pool. To fulfill these requirements, the survey questions must be identical for each respondent and the survey questionnaires must be tested, refined and usually built upon existing and proven databases.

In contrast, open-ended interviews are designed to get in-depth and context-specific answers about particular cases. They are meant to generate insights about a place or society and cannot make universalizing claims. The interviewer has specific questions and goals in mind but the questions themselves and the order of the questions can change according to the interactions between the interviewer and interviewee. The result of this type of research is usually detailed and rich descriptions that offer deeper understanding or insights.

Given the limitations of the timeframe and context, the research team focused on completing as many survey questionnaires as possible with the clear recognition that some people might not want to participate and that some respondents might not be able to answer all questions. After an attempt was made at each ground floor unit and each vendor within one block, the research team identified two respondents to carry out open-ended interviews. The surveys and interviews on each block took about one week to complete.

While conducting the in-person surveys, the research team also paid attention to the condition, layout, human interactions and atmosphere at the street stall or within the residential or business unit. The researchers particularly noted the demeanor of the respondent in order to gauge the transparency of their answers.

During the research period, the research team also visited the blocks during different times of day in order to observe and document the street life in order to map the daily rhythm of the street. Ideally, activity or cultural maps of each block would have been produced but due to the time limitations, only text-based and photographic representations were produced.

Finally, almost all of the research was conducted in Myanmar language. The two local research assistants are of course fluent in Myanmar language and the international expert is conversant. The team feels that the ability to use Myanmar language, without the need for translation, greatly facilitated the flow and success of the surveys and interviews. In the opinion of the international expert, speaking to respondents in Myanmar language shows a level of effort and respect that enables more comfortable interactions.

When the respondents requested or volunteered to conduct the surveys and interviews in other languages, the international expert followed the lead of the respondents and used Mandarin, Hokkien and English.
Appendix B:
Living Heritage in Public Markets and Spaces

Pike Place Market, Seattle, Washington

What started in 1907 as a simple farmers’ market (as a way to provide a way for farmers to sell directly to consumers without middlemen) has grown to be a vibrant center of urban life for residents and visitors alike.

After decades of steady success as a farmers’ market, Pike Place Market began to decline after World War II as farming practices and residential and shopping patterns changed. Faced with a city government plan to redevelop the area, a citizen activist group organized to save the market and establish a preservation, management, and development agency that could ensure the Market’s long-term viability. Over the last 40 years, that organization has worked to improve pedestrian and vehicular flows through the market, to plan and develop new buildings and market spaces, and to manage the market to provide a lively atmosphere while also supporting local businesses.

The Market today still provides stalls for growers and producers to sell directly to customers 362 days a year. It is also the home of many specialty restaurants and food shops (including the first Starbucks store,) craft shops and art galleries, and a large number of buskers, both regulars and travelling musicians.

While most of the Market’s shops are in enclosed buildings, part of the vibrancy of the market is the stalls and shops that open to the street, providing passerby with tantalizing sights, sounds, and smells. This spilling out of market activities onto the sidewalk is one of the most compelling aspects of the market and one of its primary draws for visitors. The Market has become one of the most important tourist destinations in the city.

Within the Market, and in the streets around it, are a broad spectrum of building types and services, from housing and office space, to transportation links and pedestrian connections to other parts of the city, to daycares, social services, and other tourist facilities. The management agency has worked to make the Market more than just a place for trade, but has endeavored to make it the center of city life. With the support of the city government, the Market has become a major anchor of a revitalized downtown Seattle.

Pike Place Market, Seattle. Image from Prayitno via Wikimedia Commons, used under Creative Commons license.
Resources

Websites

For more information about Pike Place Market, see www.pikeplacemarket.org

For other successful public markets, see www.pps.org/great_public_spaces/list?type_id=8

For an example of walkability analysis, see www.walkscore.com

GIS Datasets and public map portals


King County, Washington GIS Map portal: http://www.kingcounty.gov/operations/GIS/Maps/iMAP.aspx

Documentaries

Urbanized – directed by Gary Hustwit www.hustwit.com/category/urbanized/

The Human Scale – directed by Andreas Dalsgaard www.thehumanscale.dk/

Books


Appendix C: Resident and Vendor Survey Questionnaires
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