

WIDENING THE STRAND

Burma returns to market

Six years ago the colonial-built Strand Road in Rangoon was scheduled to become a historic district down by the river. Right now, it's an improvised boardwalk, a place of construction and modest fun. Next year, it'll be a multi-lane export superhighway. As it goes, so does Burma

ARTICLE AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY ELIZABETH RUSH

Along the Rangoon River, where tigers and elephants once roamed, two 12-year-old boys dig through heaps of brick and debris, looking for metal to sell. “Money,” says one, thrusting a fistful of antique reinforcing bar at me. The other stoops to the ground and hits the ReBar with a small hammer, breaking apart the mortar that once held the slender rod in its place. Almost overnight, a colonial-era wall, dividing the river from the city, was demolished. Those who need money the most have come to pick through the rubble at dawn.

When the Myanmar Port Authority announced unprecedented dredging of the Rangoon River in early 2011, a contract to widen the Strand Road quickly followed. It was a vital link connecting timber farmed upcountry to waterways that carry the wood away, and has long facilitated the export of this precious resource. The road was built by the British nearly 150 years ago, and is the city grid's southern river anchor – a line laid down along a faraway river to make “order” seem part of nature. It was the last land stop for the colony's exotic exports. Today, the road is too old and too narrow to bear the weight of Burma's predicted export upswing. Thus the multi-million-dollar upgrade, adding as many as 10 additional lanes in high-traffic areas.

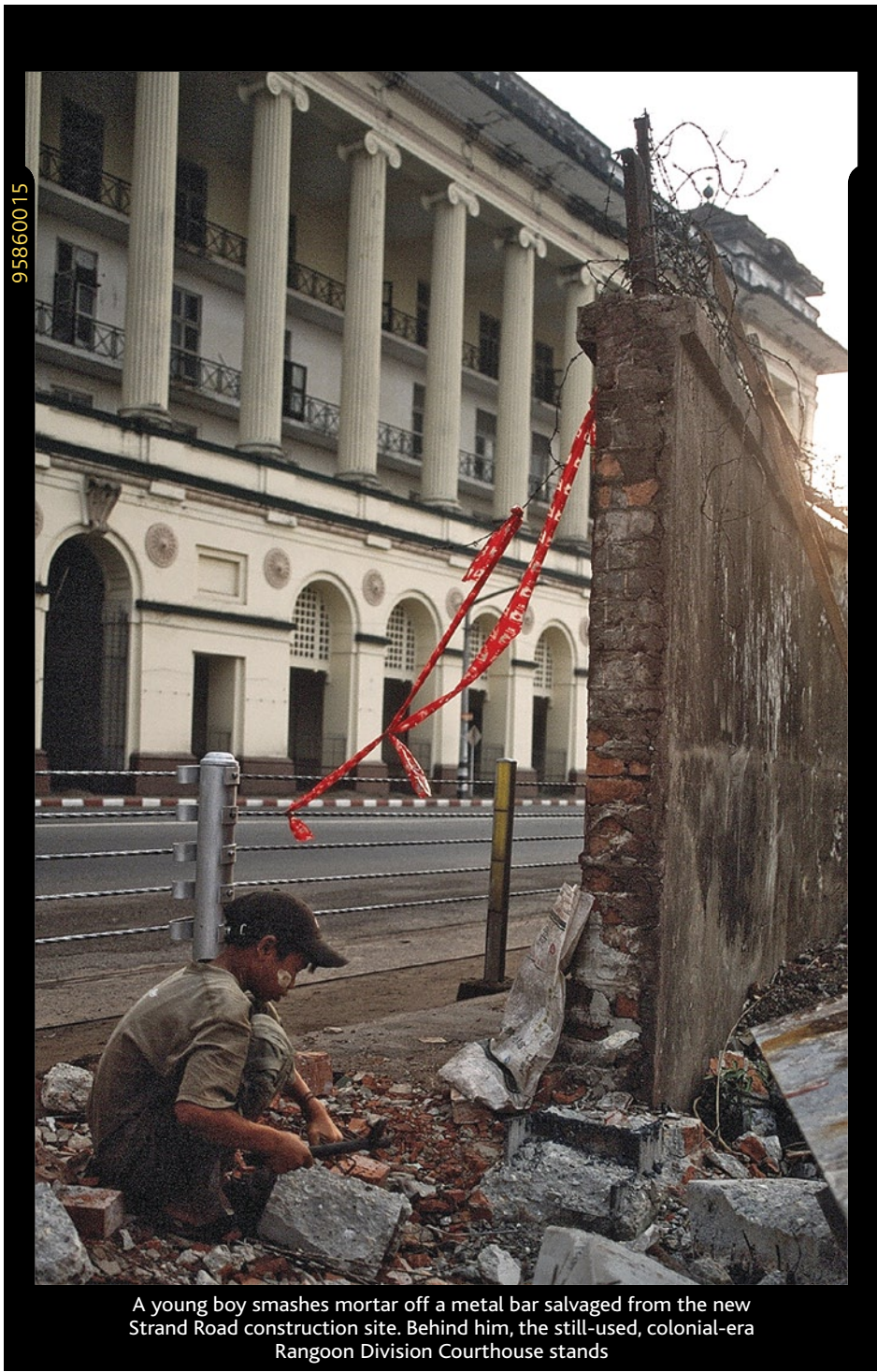
Soon the number of boats docking in Rangoon (now Yangon) will treble. Individual cargo limits will rise from 15,000 tons to 35,000 tons of deadweight per vessel. With the dredging, the port of Rangoon, the link between upper Burma and the lower Irrawaddy regions, will become vital once again. In the 1920s and 1930s Rangoon was the second busiest immigration port in the world, trailing only New York City. Indian, Bengali, Armenian and European workers and merchants arrived in astounding numbers, hoping to make their fortunes in Burma. Parochial schools popped up overnight like a healthy fungus. Department stores opened. Stained glass and hand pressed ceramic tiles were imported, wrought iron lifts installed. But unlike New York, Rangoon fell into the boom and bust cycle that defines so many of the 20th century's great cities.

Britain pulled out, the economy faltered, and a military dictatorship attempted to reassemble only what the threat of violence could unite. History shrugged and turned away. In 2010 a scanty 297,000 tourists arrived at Rangoon International Airport. The actual number of people emigrating is negligible. Today, Burma is the poorest country in South Asia. But if the new Strand Road tells us anything it's this: Burma is making plans to re-enter the international arena.

Six years ago, when the Rangoon City Development Committee (YCDC) released their strategic development plan, they earmarked the Strand Road as a heritage and conservation zone. The development plan suggested relocating the majority of port functions south to Thilawa (25km outside of the city), turning Rangoon's reclaimed waterfront into a pedestrian promenade, and refurbishing the historic buildings lining the northern side of the road.

When asked how the road could go from being a historic district to an export superhighway, the then director of building for the YCDC answered strategically: “The Strand Road is now only for, how shall I put it, transport... we hope it helps facilitate growth for medium and heavy industry.”

Already the road is flanked by billboards – for Max Cola, New Zealand Milk Powder,



A young boy smashes mortar off a metal bar salvaged from the new Strand Road construction site. Behind him, the still-used, colonial-era Rangoon Division Courthouse stands

Samsung, Herbal Shampoo, and Gold Road Coffee Mix – targeting Burma's growing middle class. The number of teenagers with income enough to purchase Rancid T-shirts is on the rise. But somewhere beyond the seductive power of plastic tchotchkes and imported television programmes, Burma's future waits.

Asia World Co Ltd, a conglomerate through which a surprising percentage of Chinese investment enters the country – with projects from the Sino-Burmese oil and gas pipeline to the recently halted Myitsone dam, and a deep-sea port in Kyaukpyu – paid for the Strand's extension. Over 40% of Rangoon's container trade moves through Asia World wharves. A wider Strand means an accelerated flow of commodities through the Port of Rangoon and an exponential rise in Asia World's profits. With a fivefold increase in freight handling predicted, Asia World (run by Steven Law, perhaps the second wealthiest man in the country) stands to make an absurd amount of money.

Despite intermittent attempts to deny the connection, Rangoon's residents know Asia World is managing the road's expansion. Public opinion about the project is unanimously nonchalant. Even though it's uncommon that any aspect of the infrastructure is overhauled, no one exhibits pride over this rare blip on Rangoon's municipal radar. A librarian, U Zaw Win, said of the expansion: “These changes really don't touch the people, they are all about foreign money and we don't see much of it.”

While the road receives extraordinary attention, little is done to update the sporadic electricity supply or the century old sewage system. Every day young boys – wearing soccer shorts and nothing else – unclog the roadside troughs by hand. Mounds of black muck affront the passers-by until another municipal worker, pushing a wheelbarrow, comes to cart it away. Half a block to the south, water is hosed over the fresh concrete on the new Strand Road, making the mixture set faster than if it were left alone.

The offloading of this postage-stamp-sized country's material wealth is no news. What comes from Burma's soil – rubies, gold, copper, opium, teak – has long been lusted after overseas. But the rate at which these materials leave is rising. Over the last two decades, the junta slowly implemented an open-market policy, leading to a tenfold increase in trade. Capital from China, Korea, India, and many Asean (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) countries flooded in and Burma's resources flowed out.

But if investment is the word of the day, then courting it from all corners of the globe has driven recent, progressive social changes. In November 2010 Burma held its first public election in nearly two decades. The process was hardly democratic – Aung San Suu Kyi, representative of the historic opposition and Nobel peace prize laureate, was banned from participating, and rumours circulated about the ballots being rigged. Yet in 2011 parliament met, and to everyone's surprise those “elected” acted



Container trade through the Rangoon Port is expected to increase dramatically in the upcoming decade as the Rangoon City Development Committee pushes through its development plan



Two boys walk home from school along the new Strand Road. Soon this impromptu pedestrian promenade will close, making way for multiple lanes of traffic



A young girl walks atop cement blocks that will become part of the new Strand Road's drainage system – a necessary precaution in the monsoon-prone delta region of lower Burma

as accountable to those whose votes they had won. More shocking, journalists were allowed to sit in on the second round of proceedings in August.

In September 2011 the government instigated a “cash for clunkers” plan. Turn in a car built over 40 years ago and receive a voucher halving the exorbitant import taxes that make a new car unattainable for most. It may not seem democratic, but it begins to level things. Owning a car built after 1971 is no longer a privilege reserved only for those with the extraordinary wealth that comes from government favouritism. Six thousand prisoners were recently released, some of them political dissidents. And President U Thein Sein halted the controversial Myitsone Dam project. The reason? Damming the sacred Irrawaddy River “is contrary to the will of the people”.

Some understand the recent developments as representative of the new president's unabashed desire to display his power; others

see the dollar signs flashing in the ex-general-turned-politician's eyes. Intellectuals rejoice over relative – if untested – freedom from fear for political dissidents, while most display a reserved casualness about whole affair. It will take more than a few fast drops in a bucket to make people hopeful after 20 years of military rule. Their inner lives, their expectations, their hopes for their families and their futures: these the people of Burma have long kept in check so that they might not be disappointed every day. These are the worlds few are willing to hand over without a real and lasting transformation.

If Burma is positioning itself to attract investment from areas of the world that have long supported sanctions, who will reap the potential benefits? Who besides the cronies who bought over 80% of the state's assets in a fire-sale auction on the eve of the 2010 elections – everything from ice factories to petrol stations; besides Tay Zaw and his Htoo group (property development, shipping,

mining, hotels and tourism), and Stephen Law and Asia World, and Chevron (one of the few US corporations operating in Burma despite sanctions); and besides the Korean and Chinese developers erecting condominiums in Rangoon with relative, break-neck speed. Might the West again begin to make a buck in this far corner of the globe?

According to *The New York Times*, Caterpillar, the US-owned bellwether of potential international investment, met members of Burma's trade bureau last summer to discuss business opportunities. The IMF last autumn concluded a fortnight's mission to Burma, investigating exchange rate policies and international payment and transfer protocols. As Burma re-enters the world, it will slowly disentangle itself from historical appearances. Soon this country will no longer seem so remote and so brutal. Let us consider the possibility that with our increased investment the people of Burma might not only



At night, locals use the new Strand Road construction site as a place for informal entertainment. Activities range from soccer matches to sing-alongs and Patrick Swayze movies



News of a water main break along the new Strand Road spread quickly through Rangoon. By morning residents lined up to take what they could of this precious resource

be guaranteed a decent wage and imported soda, but a livelihood, once the teak is felled and the rubies set in gold.

In Rangoon, construction of the Strand Road slowed with the monsoon season. In the evening, the half-finished road filled with impromptu soccer games and the chatter of couples strolling. Electricity flickered on and off, televisions were rolled outside, generators whirled, and people gathered at small plastic tables to drink tea, eat fried gourds and watch Korean soaps. The city perched on the edge of the unknown. When the road is finished, the improvised boardwalk will close. The patter of bare soles on concrete will be replaced with the rumble of eighteen-wheelers.

“Teak,” says Moe War Than, a Burmese intellectual: “the money reaped from its shipping was once the driving force behind colonisation. Today it is the same old problem, but with a new ruling party.”

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