



LESSON PLAN

Documenting Architectural Heritage



RELATED PHOTO ESSAY

Still Lives from a Vanishing City

BY ELIZABETH RUSH



Documenting Architectural Heritage



Class: 60 minutes

Key Idea

Development affects the colonial architecture of an old city in Southeast Asia altering the city's infrastructure. The city is being rebuilt and is in need of cultural preservation.

Background

This photo essay highlights domestic living spaces within colonial-era buildings in Yangon, Myanmar. Downtown Yangon, with a population of over 4 million, is known for its colonial buildings—the city has the highest number of colonial buildings in Southeast Asia. Under British rule in the 1920's and 30s, Rangoon, now known as Yangon, was the second busiest immigration port in the world and was a thriving, cosmopolitan city. In 1962, a repressive military junta seized control of the city, and in a single century, Myanmar went from being the wealthiest country in Southeast Asia to one of the poorest. Due to a change in political leadership in 2011, property rights are precarious, people are losing their homes, and buildings are slated for demolition to clear the way for new development. Citywide inspections have declared that buildings over sixty years old are dangerous and unfit for habitation.

In this photo essay, the use of “still life” photos capture the living quarters inside the abandoned colonial buildings. A still life is a work of art mostly depicting inanimate objects, both natural and man-made. Traditionally, still lifes were depicted in paintings, such as a bowl of fruit, like Monet's *Still-Life with Apples and Grapes*. The definition and nature of a still life has changed over time due to the influence of digital art to include other mediums like photography.

Connections to National Standards

Common Core English Language Arts. SL.9-10.1 and SL.11-12.1. Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 [or 11-12] topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

SUBJECT AREAS

HIGH SCHOOL

- Anthropology
- Art
- English Language Arts
- Modern World Studies
- Photography

COLLEGE

- Art
- Cultural Anthropology
- History
- Photography

THEMES

- Cultural architecture
- Effects of development
- Value of old versus new

MATERIALS

- World map
- Access to the photo essay online (or printed copies of it)

PREPARATION

- (Optional) Make copies of the photo essay



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College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies Standards. D2.Geo.6.9-12. Evaluate the impact of human settlement activities on the environmental and cultural characteristics of specific places and regions.

Next Generation Science Standards. HS-LS2-7. Design, evaluate, and refine a solution for reducing the impacts of human activities on the environment and biodiversity.

Lesson

SETTING THE STAGE

Introduce the story by showing Yangon, Myanmar, on a world map. Point out that students will be viewing a photo essay that portrays a record of the disappearing 1920's British colonial architecture inside the Southeast Asian city of Yangon. Yangon is known as "a city that captured time."

Architectural buildings, like the Great Pyramids of ancient Egypt, defined historical civilizations. Today, every city around the world has buildings. The iconic Empire State Building in New York City, the Taj Mahal in India, the Eiffel Tower in Paris, and the Leaning Tower of Pisa in Italy are some examples of buildings as cultural symbols. Ask students: How many of you think buildings can reflect the history of the places we live? What evidence do you have for your position? How do buildings tell a story of a city? Do you think a city's story matters?

ENGAGING WITH THE STORY

Read or have students read the short description of the photo essay by the photographer. Direct students to view the photo essay in pairs or groups of three. Most of the buildings captured in the photos have been slated for demolition or have already been destroyed. Invite students to note the composition of each photo, including the architectural style, the color, light, and the everyday items photographed. Some of these items include calendars in a print shop, family portraits inside a home of 60 years, framed prints, maps inside an auctioned tailor's home, a television inside a postman's living room, and a typewriter inside an office. How do these photos depict an archive, or historical documentation, of the people who live in Yangon? What can you determine about the people living in Yangon in 2011, when these photos were taken?



Delving Deeper

Lead a discussion with such questions as:

- “As Yangon is demolished and built again, the heart of the city and the history of its subtle resolve are partially preserved in these photographs,” comments photographer Elizabeth Rush. What do you think she wants us to know about the people and culture of Yangon? What do you think she is trying to preserve through these photos?
- In the photo essay, an outside development firm is trying to demolish one historic building and turn it into a 10-story apartment building. What happens when the new replaces the old? What would be the impact if a new mall replaced the iconic Liberty Bell in Philadelphia?
- How can architecture and place inspire us? Have you visited a place where the architectural buildings inspired you to document, via photography or video, your experience? What was the inspiration that motivated you? What did you wish to capture? Why? What questions did the architecture make you ask?
- In Paris, buildings and neighborhoods are centered around a square, which is a centralized meeting place that is usually pedestrian-only. How do buildings in our cities and towns reveal characteristics about us? What purpose do they serve? What would these buildings tell future generations?

Reflecting and Projecting

Give students one of the following reflective writing prompts to demonstrate their understanding of the story. (Note for teachers: Just as quotes from a book or text are used to prove an analytical thought, students use the photo essay to justify their reasoning.)

1. As the president of an architectural and cultural heritage committee in Yangon, you are trying to convince the government to turn some of these historic colonial buildings into museums and art galleries. What would you include in your proposal? How do you think this would benefit residents and tourists? (NGSS.HS-LS2-7)



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2. Many of the buildings in Yangon are over 100 years old and will be torn down. Do you think these historic buildings have value and should be restored? Do you think they should they be modernized? Why does it matter? (C3.D2.Geo.6.9-12)
3. Imagine that the photographer created a fund to give \$10,000 to a young, budding photographer emphasizing the preservation of a building in your community, town or city, past or present. Write a proposal for this project. How would this project benefit your community? What impact could it have? (CCSS.ELA.9-10.1 and SL.11-12.1)

Resources

[Yangon Heritage Trust.](#)

Elizabeth Rush, "[Entering Homes: A Year Inside Yangon's Dangerous Buildings.](#)" Global Oneness Project.

"[The Way the Old Capitol Crumbles.](#)" *The Economist*, January 6, 2014.

Frank Langfitt, "[As Myanmar Modernizes, Architectural Gems Are Endangered.](#)" NPR, June 4, 2014.