

# SLUMS SQUATTERS AND URBAN REDEVELOPMENT SCHEMES IN RANGOON, 1894-1960

MICHAEL SUGARMAN

PHD CANDIDATE

FACULTY OF HISTORY UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

This project aimed to better understand the everyday economic conditions of Rangoon's poorest communities, by analyzing the implications of decisions made by the Rangoon Development Trust (RDT) in building public housing and pursuing urban redevelopment projects. It aimed to answer whether the housing policies developed by Bombay's Improvement Trust (BIT) in the first decade of the twentieth century had any success in improving living conditions in Rangoon and to what extent Japanese-occupied and post-war Rangoon aggressively pursued public housing and urban development projects similar to other Asian port cities like Hong Kong and Singapore. By doing so, the project meant to place Rangoon more firmly into wider historical discussions of urban centers in South and Southeast Asia from which, by circumstance of twentieth century political developments, it has largely been left out.

My grant from the History Project allowed me to spend four weeks at the National Archives of Myanmar in Yangon during July/August 2015. Material at the National Archives provided the means through which some of my research questions were answered.

In the archives, I worked with approximately 125 files. Many of these files helped to answer my research questions and I expect that they will be a part of an article that I hope to publish in the coming months.

The files most relevant to my project can be divided into four main groups: Health and sanitary files, Files relating to the RDT and urban housing before 1941, Files relating to the post-war RDT and National Housing and Town and Country Development Board (NHB) and Post-war foreign ministry files relating to housing and urban development. For the remainder of this research report, I would like to briefly outline the sources in each group and explain how they helped reconnect Rangoon back into discussions of urban development in early twentieth century South and Southeast Asia.

Health and sanitary files in the National Archives of Myanmar helped illustrate the kinds of living conditions Rangoon's poorest communities faced. A 1927 report on the Public Health of Rangoon provided particularly interesting evidence. Gavin Scott, the Municipal Commissioner Rangoon, estimated there were 250,000 'coolies' in the city most of the year making up 'more than half the population.'<sup>1</sup> In providing this estimate of casual laborers, Scott's testimony points to the large numbers of Rangoon residents living in poverty. When the Rangoon Social Services League offered testimony before the committee writing the 1927 report, they said that 'the filth is indescribable' in tenement buildings where 'in every case the room visited was found to be overcrowded.'<sup>2</sup> Given that tenement buildings provided some of the cheapest housing outside of Rangoon's informal settlements, it becomes clear that a majority of Rangoon's residents faced in extremely poor living conditions. Besides only illustrating Rangoon's poor living conditions, the health and sanitary files also provide a point of comparison from which living conditions across the region – in cities like Bombay, Hong Kong and Singapore – can be compared.

RDT and urban housing files prior to 1941 provided evidence for trying to understand whether the housing policies in the twentieth century had any success in improving living conditions in Rangoon. A report of a committee appointed to analyze the effects of removing rent control in Rangoon provides one such window into understanding the effect of housing policy. Those interviewed before the committee included public health officials and municipal officials, but also landlords who owned and operated lodging tenements for Rangoon's poorest residents and the residents themselves. One resident told the committee that after 'requesting the landlord to repair the house' he had been asked to 'vacate the premises.'<sup>3</sup> Another resident was served an eviction notice after his rent increase 67% per cent over night.<sup>4</sup> Reminiscent of reports studying rent control in Bombay,

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<sup>1</sup> National Archives of Myanmar, Yangon (henceforth NAM), 1927, 4758, 4/1(21), pp. 9, 'Report on the Public Health of Rangoon Vol. II'.

<sup>2</sup> NAM, 1927, 4756, 4/6(27), pp. 86, 'Report on the Public Health of Rangoon Vol. I'.

<sup>3</sup> NAM, 1960, 11865, 4/1(22), pp. 67, 'Report of the Committee appointed to enquire into the effects of the removal of rent control in Rangoon'.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 67-68.

dissenters of the committee's report offered a scathing report of the RDT's work and living conditions in Rangoon.<sup>5</sup> The committee dissenters were not the only ones unhappy about the RDT. A resident of Rangoon's comments were translate from Burmese "The poor classes are not benefited from the Rangoon Development Trust."<sup>6</sup> These, along with other pieces of evidence, point to the tensions around and failings of the Rangoon Development Trust before World War II.

Files concerning the post-war RDT and NHB proved invaluable in answering to what extent post-war Rangoon aggressively pursued public housing and urban development projects similar to other Asian port cities like Hong Kong and Singapore. Given that these files were made accessible to researchers only after July 2014, the material is particularly important in connecting post-war developments in Rangoon to post-war developments around South and Southeast Asia. Some of these documents spoke to the immediate concerns about the logistics of restarting the RDT, like who (and particularly which ethnic background they represented) was going to make up the renewed Board of Trustees.<sup>7</sup> Other material concerned longer term plans for the development of post-war Rangoon. A 1954 development plan outlined the national objectives in housing over the 1950s. Reflecting diminishing attention to Rangoon specifically, the plan aimed to place Rangoon in the wider context of housing in all of Burma.<sup>8</sup> To indicate the kinds of post-war materials that did specifically focus on Rangoon, I've included a map of a town plan for Dalla, the town on the other side of the Rangoon River from the city docks that was reimagined in the early 1950s as a satellite town for the burgeoning city. Though this orderly settlement never quite materialized, the plans were commissioned by the Government of the Union of Burma from European and American consultants. Dalla's plans very much echo of post-war 'expert' plans for satellite towns by the Hong Kong Housing Authority and Singapore Improvement Trust.<sup>9</sup>

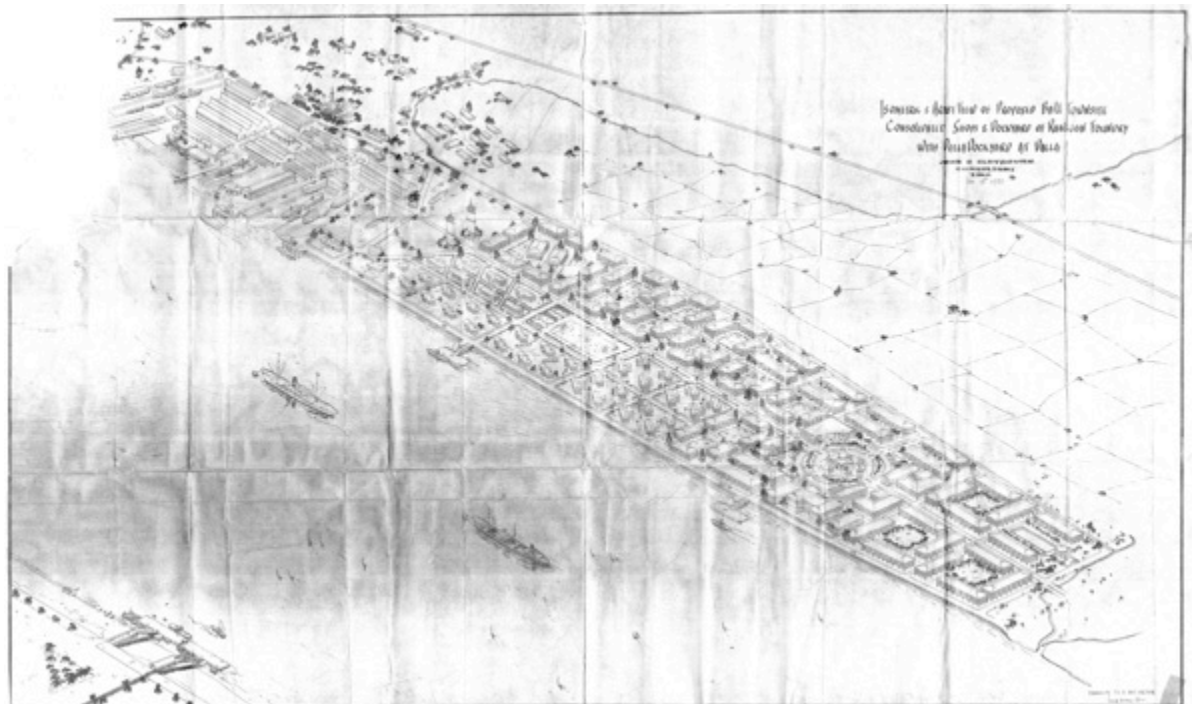


Image from National Archives of Myanmar - Accession No. 488, 1953, File Location 12/6, 'Proposed consolidation of Rangoon boundary with Dalla docking at Dalla including expansion to docking and ship facilities and the development of a housing area'.

Post-war foreign ministry files relating to housing an urban development also helped link post-war Rangoon into wider networks of urban development across South and Southeast Asia. That Burma was well connected with India, other Southeast Asian nations and the UN during the 1950s is maybe not surprising given U Thant's tenure as Secretary-General of the UN. However, the depth of the material in the archives pointing to Burma was well tapped into post-war internationalism was surprising. One file pointed to participation in regional research on housing materials<sup>10</sup> while another documented a housing conference in Delhi in which Prime Minister Nehru personally

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 20-30.

<sup>6</sup> NAM, 1927, 4756, 4/6(27), pp. 99, 'Report on the Public Health of Rangoon Vol. I'.

<sup>7</sup> NAM, 1946, 33E, 12/1, '12th meeting - Wed. 23 June 1946. To consider a memorandum by the Social Services Department on the expansion of the Board of Trustees for the development of the City of Rangoon'.

<sup>8</sup> NAM, 1955, 7681, 4/18(2), 'Comprehensive development plan supplement, Sep. 30, 1954. National housing and town and country'.

<sup>9</sup> NAM, 1953, 488, 12/6, 'Proposed consolidation of Rangoon boundary with Dalla docking at Dalla including expansion to docking and ship facilities and the development of a housing area'.

<sup>10</sup> NAM, 1958, 26, 15/3(14), 'Two regional housing countries: - are at Delhi and another at Bandung'.

entertained the Burmese delegation.<sup>11</sup> A visit to Madras State in 1954 to study the structure of their housing co-operative societies indicates that though migration patterns around the Bay of Bengal were interrupted by the rise of the nation state, some limited flows of information remained.<sup>12</sup> While this outward outlook clearly fell out of favor after the 1962 coup d'état, the country remained host to UN technical assistants until at least 1967.<sup>13</sup>

In conclusion, four weeks at the National Archives of Myanmar helped me gather data to analyze the everyday living conditions of Rangoon's poorest communities. With a rich source of materials relating to the health, sanitation, the RDT and post-war housing policies, this project has begun to reconnect urban development in Rangoon with wider regional developments in Bombay, Hong Kong and Singapore. I expect that these materials will aid and supporting an article that I hope to publish on this subject in the coming months and in my future research more generally.

In submitting my report, I would like to thank the Center for History and Economics, The History Project, and the Institute for New Economic Thinking for helping support this research.

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<sup>11</sup> NAM, 1958, 48, 1958, 15/3(3), 'Seminar on housing and community improvement in New Delhi from 21 January to 17 February, 1954'.

<sup>12</sup> NAM, 1954, 67, 15/3(31), 'Proposed visit two representatives of House Construction Co-operative Society Ltd., Rangoon to similar co-operative societies in Madras State'.

<sup>13</sup> NAM, 1955, 18, 11/11, 'Mr R Padley (The Resident Representative of the UN Technical Assistance Board, Rangoon)'.