Yangon Echoes invites viewers behind the facades of century-old colonial buildings, inside heritage homes, to explore the lives of people living in the city formerly known as Rangoon.

This exhibition explores notions and values of heritage and home at a time of unprecedented change. It presents intimate views of domestic life while tracing the emergence of this city from decades of stagnation to its engagement with a rapidly globalizing world.

Today, Yangon is probably changing more quickly than any other urban space in the world. Myanmar, formerly known as Burma, is confronting the juggernaut of global capital after fifty years of isolation under socialist military rule.

Encountering this sudden turnaround, Yangon residents are grappling with these questions: What is the role of heritage at such a time of profound political, economic and social change? What do heritage and home mean to each of us? How are we informed by the past and what are our means for survival amidst the challenges of great flux?

Yangon Echoes, an oral history listening project, investigates multicultural diversity and individual everyday lived experiences, revealing the vulnerabilities and pressures on Yangon’s people and its heritage today.

The storytellers share thoughts and feelings, speaking of joy and tragedy, simple pleasures and aching issues. Told with courage and charm, the informal stories of home offer insight into what has happened and is happening to the city.

This exhibition, a popular history of buildings, charts social space and urban folklore, linking past to present via living memories.
Layers of Time

When the British invaded Burma in the 1850s, Yangon was a small, swampy settlement but a strategic river port hosting the Shwedagon Pagoda, Myanmar’s most important shrine. The colonists set about draining and dredging the sinking sandy land and a grid plan was laid out to form the city center. Merchant houses, banks and insurance companies, many from Scotland and Glasgow in particular, established themselves and commissioned elegant Victorian buildings for their offices designed by leading architects of the day. Rangoon grew into a sophisticated hub of global trade, thriving on exports of rice, teak and oil.

Emigrating Indians and Chinese moved to Burma. The British brought indentured labor from India. Rice field workers came from South India, Tamils from Madras. People from Bihar worked the sugarcane plantations. Wealthy Chettiar moneylenders soon owned seventy percent of agricultural land. Engineers, doctors and most of the high-ranking administrators in the Secretariat, the seat of British administration, were Indian Hindus and Moslems. Much of Yangon’s business community was also Indian. Textiles were managed by people from Rajasthan and Memon. Gold, diamond and jewelry businesses were run by Gujaratis, who also handled rice milling. Hardware was the domain of people from Surat who ran Yangon’s Surti Bazaar, today the central market, Theingyi Zay. Wealthy Chinese migrated to Yangon rather than the Philippines, Singapore or Malaysia. Hokkien traders and Cantonese businessmen were drawn to emerging opportunities.

Through personal stories, this exhibition reveals a ‘living history’ of the country since WWII, as told by the storytellers, most of the elders, living in Yangon’s heritage places.

Some storytellers recall the devastating bombings of Yangon by both Japanese and British forces during World War II, scattering residents and leaving a once fine city in tatters. With Burma on the cusp of becoming independent of British rule, optimism soon turned to tragedy. Everyone of age in this country remembers exactly what they were doing around half past ten on the morning of 19th July 1947, when General Aung San and six of his cabinet members in waiting were assassinated. Fractured shoots of democracy were eliminated by General Ne Win’s coup d’état in 1962. Installing a centralized economy on a nationalist mission, the socialist government wiped out companies and trading houses overnight, appropriating all buildings, land and inventory listed as the property of private businesses. Many foreigners were obliged to leave the country at
short notice. Nationalization had painful consequences. For decades, citizens were forced to endure harsh living conditions imposed by the regime.

Since 2011 when the country opened up, the trickle of international investment has become a flood. Post-colonial transitions and modernizations unfolding over decades in much of Asia now stun Myanmar. Enduring more than a century, many of Yangon’s antique buildings and the stories that go with them are being erased in the rush to modernize.

**Heritage and Home**

Institutions and governments often charge themselves with the task of deciding what relics are significant or important enough to be preserved. Such selections are contrived to project a national narrative, the story of the day. In authorized versions, the voices and ideas of common folk are usually unheard. Traditional history concentrates on famous people and their powerful deeds. But what do these events mean to folk going about their daily lives, feeding families, getting children to school and earning a living?

Ideally, home is a place to rest and feel safe, to build strength and share. Beyond bricks and bamboo, homes are repositories of feelings and memories, of values and meanings. Yangon heritage homes are a mix of humble and grand homes, some lovingly maintained, others completely derelict.

This exhibition is based on the book *Yangon Echoes, Inside heritage homes*, an illustrated anthology of oral histories. A listening project, it speaks of events as remembered and told by elders, who are valuable heritage repositories, their stories representing precious local wisdom, a pool of living memories. Presented here are the everyday stories of people who have made their homes in Yangon’s heritage buildings, their connection with place, identity and family inheritance.

In times of great change, heritage and home are stabilizing influences, offering reference points and continuity, anchoring us, reminding us where we have come from and who we are.
The East-West Center promotes better relations and understanding among the people and nations of the United States, Asia, and the Pacific through cooperative study, research, and dialogue. Established by the U.S. Congress in 1960, the Center serves as a resource for information and analysis on critical issues of common concern, bringing people together to exchange views, build expertise, and develop policy options. The Center is an independent, public, nonprofit organization with funding from the U.S. government, and additional support provided by private agencies, individuals, foundations, corporations, and governments in the region.

The East-West Center Arts Program for more than 38 years has enriched the community through concerts, lectures, symposia, and exhibitions focusing on arts of the region, and by arranging cultural and educational tours by artists who are skilled in bridging cultures.

EWC Arts Team: Karen Knudsen, director; Office of External Affairs; Michael Schuster, Ph.D., curator; Eric Chang, arts program coordinator; Anna Reynolds, arts program assistant; William Feltz, adjunct arts specialist; Gary Yoshida, Elizabeth Kuioka, development officers; Kisore Sherreitt, student assistant

Mahalo: Tin Myaing Thein, Miemie Winn Byrd, MaMa Naing, U Than Nyunt, U Sein Myint, U Min Lwin Do, Myanmar Frangipani Travels & Tours, Ba Thaw, Helping Hands, Aung Thapay Hotel, Sammy Samuels, Lynne Najita, Kennedy & Preiss Graphic Design, Leilani Ng, Colorprints Inc., Nancy Hulbirt, Brooks Bays, Jr., SOEST, Ann Hartman, Meril Fujiki, Jennifer Leger, Shayne Hasegawa, Derek Ferrar, Phyllis Tabusa, Lucy Kamealoha, Deanna O’Brien, Tina Tom, Patsy Hiraoka, Marie Ebesu, EWC Facilities Management, and all the generous contributors to the book Yangon Echoes.

AQUA-ASTON HOSPITALITY

SONY

This exhibition is made possible by The Hawaii Pacific Rim Society; Richard H. Cox; Aqua-Aston Hospitality; Sony Hawaii Company; and Friends of Hawaii Charities, Inc.

The EWC Arts Program is supported by EWC Arts ‘Ohana members, Jean E. Rolles, Jackie Chan Foundation USA, and other generous donors.

Special Events
In the EWC Gallery with free admission, unless otherwise noted.

Sunday, January 29, 2:00–3:30 p.m. 
Exhibition Gala Opening including reception and a short dance performance by the local Burmese community and exhibition tour with visiting curators, Virginia Henderson and Tim Webster.

Sunday, February 5, 2:00–3:00 p.m.
Illustrated Talk: “Developing Yangon Echoes” by visiting curators Virginia Henderson and Tim Webster.

Sunday, February 26, 2:00–3:00 p.m.

Sunday, March 19, 2:00–3:00 p.m.

Saturday & Sunday, April 1 & 2
(See Performance at right.)

Sunday, April 23, 2:00–3:00 p.m.

Sunday, May 7, 2:00–3:30 p.m.
Film: “Burma VJ: Reporting from a Closed Country” is a 2008 documentary film directed by Anders Ostergaard. It follows the Saffron Revolution against the military regime in Burma.

Sunday, May 21, 2:00–3:00 p.m.

Performance:
Saturday, April 1, 4:00–5:30 p.m.
Sunday, April 2, 4:00–5:30 p.m.
UH Mānoa Orvis Auditorium

Myanmar Marionette Theatre

The Myanmar Marionette Theatre is at the forefront of restoring the enchanting 18th c. Burmese puppet tradition and developing a new generation of artists and audiences. Suitable for children and adults, the performance will showcase puppeteers accompanied by live traditional music.

Tickets available Feb. 1, see website for details.

East-West Center Gallery
John A. Burns Hall, 1601 East-West Road (corner Dole St. & East-West Rd.)

Gallery admission is free.

Hours: Open Weekdays 8:00 a.m.–5:00 p.m. and Sundays Noon–4:00 p.m.
Closed Saturdays, Feb. 20, Apr. 16, May 29
Parking on the UH-Mānoa campus is normally free and ample on Sundays.

Free school & group tours available
For further information: 944-7177 arts@EastWestCenter.org
http://arts.EastWestCenter.org

http://arts.EastWestCenter.org

Printed with soy based inks on recycled paper