Studio Bagan: Engaging with Cultural Heritage Conservation through Problem-Based Learning across Disciplines

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1. Towards a People-Centered Approach to Heritage Conservation

Heritage is neither just about the past nor just about material things. Heritage is a process of engagement, an act of communication and of making meaning in and for the present (Smith 2006). What we frame as cultural heritage is a cultural practice that helps us relate to our memory. It is a resource for sustaining quality of life in a constantly evolving society. Every person should therefore have the right to engage with the cultural heritage of their choice while respecting the rights and freedoms of others (Council of Europe 2005). The shift away from an object-based approach towards a people-centered approach in conservation means that there should no longer be a focus on material conservation alone (ICCROM 2015; Wijesuriya 2008, 2018). Conservation means managing change in a way that enhances the values ascribed to objects, buildings, or places and allows for a continuation of this practice of engagement. Engaging with and caring for the past—even the contemporary past—substantially contribute to the identity of cities and communities and thereby to urban sustainability in various ways. Given that this process acknowledges cultural diversity, it contributes to strengthening social cohesion and the development of peaceful and tolerant societies (UNESCO 2016). Yet, it has long been ignored in terms of its vital role in sustainable development, at least in official UN documents.

2. Heritage in the SDGs

Since the mid-nineties, there have been campaigns by UNESCO and others pushing for culture and heritage to be recognized as enablers and drivers of sustainable development. Only in 2015 was culture recognized in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), most significantly as target 11.4, which proposes to "strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard the world's cultural and natural heritage" in order to contribute to SDG 11, which aims to make "cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable" (UN 2015, p. 24). According to the corresponding policy documents, the progress of meeting target 11.4 is meant to be solely measured by per capita public and private expenditure on cultural and natural

heritage (UN 2017). While this generic target suggests, on the one hand, that, in any context, knowledge regarding heritage conservation is existent and money alone will facilitate the safeguarding, it also maintains the long-dismissed standpoint that the protection of cultural and natural heritage will automatically lead to sustainable development (Labadi 2019b, p. 80). In this oversimplified and static understanding, heritage is seen as an asset—evoking images of beautifully restored historic cities and staged cultural performances—used for generating economic development through tourism. This understanding, however, has led to the over-commercialization and exploitation of cultural heritage worldwide (Cave and Negussie 2017; Labadi 2019b).

In this text, we propose that in order to ensure cultural heritage is protected sustainably and contributes to SDG 11, the general understanding of cultural heritage within UN agendas would need to change. Instead of being understood as a physical asset and a "cash-making machine" (Labadi 2019b, p. 84), it would have to be recognized as an everyday social practice (Byrne 2014; Smith 2006). At the same time, SDG targets would need to be localized and translated into local and regional policies. We want to stress that in contexts where architects and planners have little awareness of cultural heritage and its need for people-centered approaches, mere public or private spending on cultural heritage—as proposed by the indicator for target 11.4—will not strengthen its protection, let alone contribute to the sustainability of cities and communities. In this regard, we will examine the education of architects in Myanmar, which nearly omits cultural heritage, and give an example of a higher-education cooperation project that aims to respond to this gap. Studio Bagan provides an opportunity for architecture students to gain an understanding of heritage conservation through problem-based learning at one of Asia's most famous Buddhist heritage sites and Myanmar's flagship tourist destination.

3. Architecture Education in Myanmar

Architecture education in Myanmar was first established at Yangon Technological University (YTU) in 1954. The university had been formed under British colonial rule in 1924. At this time, the institution was known as Rangoon University, and later—after Burmese independence in 1948—as the Rangoon Institute of Technology (RIT), famous for its engineering programs and for being one of the best universities in Asia (ASEAN Federation of Engineering Organisations 2018). However, following a military coup in 1962, the quality of education began to decline or rather be purposefully run down in accordance with an emerging anti-intellectual state ideology, the so-called "Burmese Way to Socialism". Foreign teachers were fired, and there was nearly no investment in education for three decades (Thant Myint-U

2020). This did not change much when the successive military regime took over in 1988. When, in 1996, a Master of Architecture (M.Arch.) program was established, architecture education had already been raddled by decades of structural neglect and limited resources for Myanmar's higher-education system. Up until today, architecture education has maintained a strong focus on engineering. The need for interdisciplinary learning has not been reflected in architecture curricula, partially due to their long isolation from international academic discourse (Pwint 2019). The Association of Myanmar Architects (AMA) has been instrumental in complementing university education by offering seminars and talk series ranging from new technologies to urban planning and understanding heritage values.

Since the opening of the country in 2011, universities including YTU have been making efforts to re-engage with the international academic community and develop their curricula (Hlaing and Lacks 2015; Pwint 2019). Up until the coup d'état in February 2021, YTU was pursuing the establishment of a post-graduate course in urban planning and an elective course in cultural heritage in collaboration with local and international partners (Pwint and Latt 2019). In the short-term, however, interdisciplinary and intercultural teaching formats such as field schools or studios organized bi- or multi-laterally had been considered to bring new perspectives and enable international exposure for Myanmar and international students alike, as well as for all teaching staff involved.

In parallel, local NGOs—at the forefront the Yangon Heritage Trust—and UNESCO through its regional office in Bangkok had been making efforts to raise awareness, build the capacity of professionals, and advise the government and local authorities on policy making regarding cultural heritage. The formation of the Myanmar national committee of the International Council of Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) in 2017 showed that heritage activists were organizing themselves in civil society organizations that would hopefully strengthen advocacy for cultural heritage and provide professional development for their members. However, such efforts are unfortunately on hold while the country is struggling to fight against a renewed military take-over that began in early 2021. As of now, the higher-education system in Myanmar, including architecture education, is temporary collapsed.

4. Studio Bagan

Studio Bagan is an example of new efforts toward education and awareness-building. It was conceptualized as an interdisciplinary conservation studio that would foster applied knowledge transfer in the fields of cultural heritage, urban and regional planning, and design in historic contexts. At the same time, it was

meant to make a contribution to the sustainable conservation of Bagan—one of Myanmar's flagship tourist destinations. The studios in this program have been implemented as summer schools with a strong field component during which the students immerse themselves in the site for about two weeks. However, in the face of the pandemic and a dramatically changed political environment in Myanmar, the most recent studio employed blended learning and was implemented as a four-week winter school that took place in November/December 2021. Since the collapse of Myanmar's higher education system, Studio Bagan has also collaborated with Spring University Myanmar (SUM, https://www.springuniversitymm.com/, accessed on 15 September 2023), an NGO that provides an online learning platform in the context of Myanmar's ongoing crisis of education.

Initiated in 2017, three studios have been established so far. The first studio was established in November 2017, the second was established in October 2018, and the third was established in November 2021. The two latter studios were funded under the summer school program of the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD). The studios are embedded in a longer-term partnership and exchange program jointly provided by the Brandenburg University of Technology (BTU) and the Yangon Technological University (YTU).

So far, Studio Bagan has had 72 participants with varying academic backgrounds, including in architecture, urban planning, archaeology, and cultural heritage conservation, and stemming from seventeen different countries. This inter-disciplinary and intercultural learning experience has been enriching and has offered different perspectives on situations encountered in Bagan. The teachers of BTU and YTU guiding the studio work are involved in different academic disciplines, such as architecture, with differing fields of specialization; architectural conservation; cultural anthropology; urban planning; and engineering. This approach guarantees multiple perspectives on and methodologies for problems encountered in the field. The organization of the studios is executed in collaboration with the Association of Myanmar Architects and experts from local NGOs, such as Tourism Transparency and the Bagan Heritage Trust, as well as government agencies such as the Department of Archaeology or the Bagan Branch of the Ministry of Hotels and Tourism. Engagement with these stakeholders is important for providing hands-on perspectives from fields relevant for the sustainable conservation of Bagan.

Located east of the Ayeyarwaddy River in Myanmar's central dry zone, Bagan (Figure 1) encompasses more than twenty-five square kilometers of mostly agricultural land that is dotted with Buddhist monuments and interspersed with a few small villages and semi-urban areas. While the site is an archaeological testament

to the once-flourishing capital of Myanmar's first kingdom, many of the pagodas at the site are still venerated, and pilgrims from all over the country come to visit them annually. Up until February 2021, with an increasing influx of international visitors since the opening of Myanmar's borders in 2011 and the site's World Heritage induction in July 2019, Bagan had been facing a number of challenges associated with tourism development at the site (Casper et al. 2019).

Figure 1. View of Old Bagan. Source: Photo by author Clara Rellensmann/ © Studio Bagan, used with permission.

The participants of Studio Bagan immersed themselves in the site to identify related problems sometimes caused by insensitive touristic actions, a lack of tourism infrastructure, or both. The main aims to be achieved in the studios were (1) exploring, (2) understanding heritage values and analyzing identified problems, and (3) developing conceptual approaches and strategies. Besides taking into consideration the globally accepted "World Heritage values" of Bagan, which mainly focus on the architectural quality of the site's monuments and the Buddhist practice of merit-making, special emphasis was placed on developing concepts along with an understanding of the local values and alternative narratives of the site. These perspectives were gained through fieldwork, interviews, and consultations with local stakeholders and activists. The data collected and produced during the fieldwork

in Bagan were processed in the follow-up as e-publications that can be shared with partners in Myanmar and stakeholders working in related fields at the site.

5. 2017: Building in a Heritage Context

The first studio dealt with "temple climbing", an issue that had been affecting Bagan for decades and been deemed as incompatible with the spiritual significance and religious use of the monuments (Figure 2). The term relates to all activities that involve standing on the monuments that are spread throughout the site, usually with the objective of securing a panoramic view during sunrise and sunset. (Rellensmann and Römer 2018) Some local stakeholders and national authorities had deemed the practice incompatible with the religious use of the site and harmful to the physical fabric of the monuments.
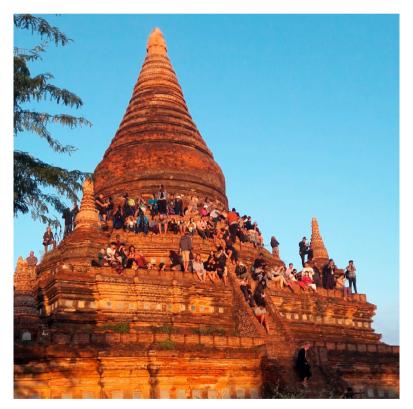

Figure 2. Tourists sitting on a pagoda to watch the sunrise. Source: Photo by author Clara Rellensmann/ © Studio Bagan, used with permission.

The aim of the studio was therefore to undertake a careful assessment of this issue and develop concepts for alternative viewing platforms and management schemes that would be sensitive to the heritage environment and enhance the protection of the overall site. A central component of the fieldwork in Bagan was to understand the multiple values of Bagan, as well as local perspectives on the issue of temple climbing, in order to be able to develop suitable design ideas and management proposals. Concerning the design ideas, any new facilities inserted into this sacred urban landscape could not cause any adverse impacts on its heritage values and related practices. Thus, Heritage Impact Assessment (HIA) was used as a methodology for guiding the design process. It is a structured process geared towards maintaining the significance of a site when developing and designing projects that will bring change. Design ideas also had to take into consideration locally available materials and traditional construction techniques. Another component of the task was to define parameters for location analysis based on field explorations and with reference to zoning regulations in order to assess different locations throughout Bagan in terms of their suitability for constructing alternative viewing platforms.

The design ideas developed by the students responded to the multiple heritage values and varying conditions found at the assessed locations, including the visibility of iconic monuments and balloons rising in the morning. This was also reflected in a 1:1 prototype viewing platform that the students built on the last day of fieldwork together with local bamboo craftsmen. It was a modular structure made from bamboo and was built on a natural mound alongside a north–south axis so that its orientation toward the east and west made it useable for sunrise as well as sunset viewings. The temporary and low-scale structure blended well into the landscape and had nearly no visual impact. It was easily extendable and replicable throughout the site (Figure 3).

In the studio, the students learned how to approach design tasks through a heritage lens, that is, with greater sensitivity to the various heritage values that people attribute to a site. For this purpose, they applied methodologies from various disciplines, including stakeholder analysis and consultations, SWOT and location analysis, and Heritage Impact Assessment (HIA), that helped them to define parameters to be considered in their designs and management concepts.

Figure 3. Students watching the sunrise from self-built prototype viewing platform.
Source: Photo by author Clara Rellensmann, © Studio Bagan, used with permission.

6. 2018: Heritage Tourism—Conflicts and Chances

As it became clear in the first studio that "temple climbing" was just one of the many issues affecting Bagan, the second studio addressed a wider range of challenges related to tourism. After a theoretical introduction at the Yangon University of Technology, the actual fieldwork started with a scouting game, the so-called "Bagan Rally". The student teams were sent into the site to explore various aspects of the local culture and develop individual perceptions of specific issues pertaining to the site.

The students investigated the construction history of individual monuments and searched for myths and beliefs of guardian spirits associated with some of the most-visited monuments in Bagan. By documenting the physical transformation and spiritual significance of individual monuments, they developed an understanding of the dynamic character of Bagan's monumental heritage. They also met with Bagan locals to develop an understanding of the site beyond its monuments. Through this approach, they gained an understanding of everyday life in Bagan and the attitudes and sometimes conflicting views regarding the growing visitor numbers and touristic development of the site.

Based on Lucius Burckhardt's strollology, or the science of walking, (Burkhardt 2006), the students explored Bagan on foot, documenting the scene with their medium

of choice (Figure 4). Through attentive perception of their immediate environment, the students were able to identify problems and issues related to many everyday situations and consequently develop individual research topics for the conservation studio (Figures 5 and 6). These topics ranged from technical infrastructure and transportation networks to community-based tourism development, waste management, advocacy for natural heritage protection at a site primarily recognized for its cultural heritage, traditional products of the regional economy, and site-specific problems of access or commercial activities. The students worked in intercultural and interdisciplinary teams to analyze their topics and develop concepts and design ideas for adequate responses that were presented and discussed in public consultations in Bagan (Casper et al. 2019) (Figure 7).

Figure 4. Students had to blindly place a glass on their Bagan maps, draw a circle around it, and then walk along the edge of the circle. Source: Drawing by Jessica Voth, © Studio Bagan, used with permission.

Figure 5. On-site consultation with an officer of the Bagan branch of the Archaeology Department Source: Photo by Laura Hernandez, © Studio Bagan, used with permission.
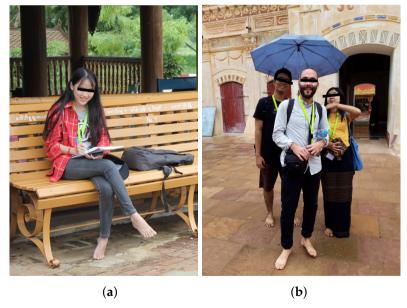

(**a**)   (**b**)

Figure 6. (**a**,**b**) Students during the execution of fieldwork in Bagan. Source: Photos by Philipp Stiebler & Jens Casper © Studio Bagan, used with permission.

Figure 7. Students attending their final presentations of their Studio Bagan work
Source: Photo by Laura Hernandez, © Studio Bagan, used with permission.

7. 2020/2021: Exploring Counternarratives

The third studio was planned to be set up in 2020, and its goal was to mitigate the impacts of tourism in Bagan by diversifying the narratives told about the site. For this studio, cooperation with Bagan's tour guide association was planned. The task for the students would have been to look beyond the much-promoted "World Heritage values" of Bagan in order to gain a deeper understanding of the seemingly ordinary built and natural environment and its social and cultural values with a view to creating informative and illustrative maps that could help visitors to read and understand the diverse heritage of Bagan. The amplification of the visitors' experiences was meant to alleviate the pressure from over-visited sights while sensitizing visitors to their cultural environment and contributing to the protection of cultural and natural diversity at Bagan.

However, since the COVID-19 pandemic, Bagan has been facing much different problems than those associated with mass tourism. On the contrary, due to the sudden halt of global tourism, many people at Bagan and in all of Myanmar are struggling to make ends meet due to a lack on income from tourism. In addition to the problems caused by the global pandemic, a radical change in Myanmar's political environment has added extra strain for the people of Bagan and all of Myanmar.

Since the coup on 1st February 2021, there have been violent incidents and casualties in Bagan. Peaceful demonstrations were brutally cracked down on by police and military. There have also been reports of land grabbing at the site.

In the face of the current political situation, international student projects at Bagan have become impossible to organize for the time being. Thus, in 2021, Studio Bagan was organized as a 4-week online summer school. Here, the focus was shifted away from the monumental site of Bagan. The students were instead asked to explore their own agency in the process of heritage-making. They applied a feminist lens to the built environment by taking a phenomenological experiential approach in describing their grandmother's houses as "unintentional monuments" (Riegl 1903). Methods for this exploration included using drawing, mapping, textual description, and photography to create unique heritage narratives.

Despite this innovative digital alternative through which the students gain an in-depth understanding of heritage as a process, it is hoped that Studio Bagan can return to the actual site in the future.

8. Contributing to Sustainable Cities and Communities

In a context wherein developmental pressure is high and the awareness of cultural heritage is low, the quest to achieve sustainable cities and communities needs to promote education and public dialogue. This needs to be reflected when translating SDG 11 and its target 11.4 into local policy. In this process, linkages between SDG 11 and other SDGs need to be strengthened, e.g., with SDG4, particularly target 4.7, which aims to improve education for sustainable development by mainstreaming related themes into national education policies and curricula (UN 2017).

Studio Bagan is an attempt to make a small difference by complementing the education of architects with a problem-based learning format. This format is intended to equip future architects, planners, and heritage professionals with an understanding of heritage as a process of engagement that contributes to the sustainability of cities and communities and that needs varying conditions to thrive. By sharing the student-generated ideas with stakeholders in Myanmar, Studio Bagan also seeks to instill public debate concerning issues that are currently impairing Bagan's sustainable conservation. A number of these issues are caused by a static and utilitarian understanding of heritage as solely a driver of economic development instead of as a contributor to social cohesion and cultural identity as well as peace-building, post-conflict reconstruction, and reconciliation, which are integral components of sustainable development (Labadi 2019a, 2019b; UNESCO 2016).

To avoid the over-commercialization of cultural heritage and associated conservation problems, it is necessary to transcend the provision of funds for physical conservation, as suggested by the indicator of SDG 11.4. The nature of cultural heritage as a dynamic process of value attribution needs to be reflected in university curricula so that future architects and planners, when confronted with heritage contexts, can pay more attention to the social dynamics behind the things that we frame as heritage. This, in turn, would lead them to approach design tasks through a heritage lens, that is, with greater sensitivity to the various heritage values that people attribute to a site. Studio Bagan is an attempt to promote such an understanding of heritage in the context of architecture education.

In a world where circular economies and building in the existing fabric become more and more relevant in the face of climate change, the integration of cultural heritage education into university curricula is becoming increasingly important. This, however, needs to transcend a purely material understanding of heritage. Heritage needs to be understood as a place-making practice that anyone can engage in, not only as a resource to generate income but also as a means of becoming visible in society, fostering a sense of community and belonging that enriches everyday life. This is not only true for Myanmar but also for any other context.

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