



Layers of authenticity: Tracing multicultural narratives in the goethe-institut building, Yangon, Myanmar

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ABSTRACT

Background: This study investigates the Goethe-Institut building in Yangon, Myanmar, highlighting its significance as a case of adaptive reuse and heritage conservation. Constructed in the 1920s during British colonial rule, the building showcases a blend of architectural styles, merging colonial engineering with Burmese, Chinese, and Indian design elements. Over the years, it has transitioned from a private residence to a revolutionary headquarters, an art school, and now serves as a cultural hub. **Methods:** This study examines the Goethe-Institut building in Yangon, Myanmar, through site observations, historical analysis, and a literature review, focusing on its architectural significance and role in heritage conservation. **Findings:** The research delves into the building's historical evolution and architectural features while addressing the challenges of adaptive reuse within urban heritage conservation. It emphasizes how these strategies have preserved historical authenticity while meeting contemporary needs and sustainability goals. Key elements such as high ceilings, wide verandas, and intricate carvings are analyzed for their cultural significance. By comparing similar projects across Southeast Asia, the study illustrates the potential of heritage conservation to enhance cultural identity and community engagement. It argues that the Goethe-Institut exemplifies the transformative power of adaptive reuse in preserving architectural heritage, offering insights for sustainable urban development and postcolonial narratives. **Conclusion:** The findings underscore the importance of integrating historical context with modern functionality to foster resilience in urban environments. **Novelty/Originality of this article:** This study provides a unique contribution by analyzing the Goethe-Institut building in Yangon as a case of adaptive reuse, highlighting its role in preserving architectural heritage while addressing contemporary sustainability challenges, and offering comparative insights from similar projects across Southeast Asia.

KEYWORDS: adaptive reuse; architectural authenticity; heritage conservation; multicultural architecture; sustainable urban development.

1. Introduction

1.1 Purpose and context

Urbanization, a hallmark of the modern era, reshapes cities worldwide, driving economic growth and infrastructural advancements. However, this transformation often comes at the cost of cultural and historical landmarks, which face demolition or neglect under the pressure of new developments. These landmarks, integral to a city's identity and historical narrative, are increasingly replaced by high-rises and commercial complexes, leading to cultural erasure that extends beyond the physical disappearance of structures.

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In Southeast Asia, the conflict between rapid urban development and heritage conservation is particularly pronounced. Yangon, Myanmar, serves as a prime example, boasting colonial-era architecture, traditional homes, and sacred sites now overshadowed by modernization (Roberts, 2017). The Goethe-Institut building in Yangon exemplifies how such heritage structures can be preserved and repurposed amidst urban pressures. Originally constructed during British colonial rule, this building reflects Yangon's layered history, from colonial times to post-independence transformations. Today, as a cultural hub, it bridges the past and present, showcasing the potential of heritage buildings to address contemporary urban needs.

Preserving urban heritage is critical due to its multifaceted significance. Beyond aesthetic value, historical buildings anchor continuity in urban landscapes, linking cities to their pasts. Heritage conservation also supports sustainability by reducing the environmental costs of demolition and reconstruction. Additionally, it fosters community identity and ensures that cultural narratives endure amidst modernization. With growing global awareness of the importance of heritage preservation, strategies balancing development and conservation have become imperative. The adaptive reuse of the Goethe-Institut building offers a compelling case study, highlighting the intersection of heritage conservation and sustainable urban development.

1.2 Significance of adaptive reuse

Adaptive reuse has emerged as a vital strategy for conserving heritage in urban settings. This approach revitalizes historical buildings by repurposing them for modern functions, ensuring their relevance while preserving their architectural and historical integrity. The dual focus on preservation and functionality positions adaptive reuse as a cornerstone of sustainable urban development (Bhabha, 1994).

Environmentally, adaptive reuse reduces the need for new construction materials, significantly lowering carbon emissions and minimizing waste. Additionally, it often incorporates traditional architectural features such as passive cooling systems and local materials, aligning with modern sustainability goals. These elements demonstrate the environmental benefits of maintaining and adapting existing structures (Brooker, 2018).

Culturally, adaptive reuse allows cities to retain their unique identities. Historical buildings act as repositories of collective memory, preserving the stories, traditions, and cultural values of their communities. Repurposing these buildings reinvigorates their social and cultural significance, particularly in Southeast Asia, where colonial and indigenous influences converge. Adaptive reuse respects this cultural tapestry while addressing the demands of contemporary urban life (Bullen, 2011).

Globally, adaptive reuse has proven transformative in various contexts. Projects such as the Raffles Hotel in Singapore and Penang's Blue Mansion illustrate how colonial-era buildings can be revitalized as cultural landmarks and economic assets. In cities like New York and London, industrial buildings have been repurposed into cultural spaces, showcasing the versatility of adaptive reuse. In Yangon, the Goethe-Institut building exemplifies this potential. Its transformation from a colonial villa to a cultural hub illustrates how adaptive reuse preserves historical authenticity while meeting contemporary functional demands.

1.3 Historical context of Yangon and the goethe-institut building

Yangon's history is deeply intertwined with its colonial past, which significantly shaped the city's architectural and urban landscape. Under British rule, Yangon evolved from a modest port town into a major colonial hub. The city's grid-based layout, characterized by wide boulevards and grand public buildings, reflected British aspirations for governance and commerce (Hsio et al. 2017). Colonial villas, designed for tropical climates while symbolizing wealth and status, became defining architectural features. These

structures often incorporated elevated foundations, wide verandas, and high ceilings, blending European engineering with regional adaptations.

The Goethe-Institut building, constructed in the 1920s, embodies this synthesis of colonial and local architectural traditions. Initially built as a private residence for a European family, it reflected Yangon's cosmopolitan character, shaped by European, Burmese, Chinese, and Indian influences. In the 1930s, Chan Chaw Paing, a prominent Chinese merchant, acquired the property and introduced decorative elements such as lattice screens and carved wood panels, infusing it with Chinese cultural motifs.

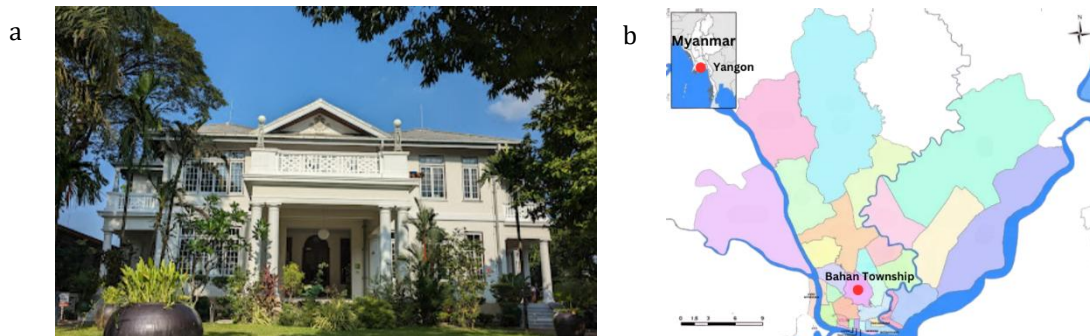


Fig. 1. (a) The Goethe Institut Building, Yangon (Bo Bo Min, 2023) ; (b) Location of Bahan Township in Yangon, Myanmar

During the 1940s, the building gained political significance as the headquarters of General Aung San's Revolutionary Association, symbolizing Myanmar's independence struggle. In the following decades, it served as the High School of Art from 1967 to 2006, cementing its role as a cultural and educational hub fostering artistic talent. In 2014, after extensive restoration, it was repurposed as the Goethe-Institut, a cultural center promoting cross-cultural dialogue and education. This transformation underscores the building's adaptability and its enduring relevance to Yangon's evolving social, political, and cultural landscape.



Fig. 2. Location of goethe institut building in bahan township, Yangon, Myanmar

1.4 Research scope and questions

This study examines the Goethe-Institut building in Yangon, Myanmar, as a notable case of adaptive reuse within the context of urban heritage conservation. Originally constructed as a colonial-era private residence, the building has evolved over the decades, serving as a revolutionary headquarters, an educational institution, and now a cultural center. Its multifaceted history offers valuable insights into the socio-political and cultural transformations of Yangon, as well as the broader implications of preserving historical landmarks in rapidly urbanizing cities (Dovey, 2019).

This study focuses on how the Goethe-Institut balances historical authenticity with modern functionality by addressing several key questions. First, regarding historical

dimensions: how does the Goethe-Institut building reflect Yangon's socio-political and cultural evolution over the past century? This question traces the building's shifting roles across different historical periods, from the colonial era to its current function, linking these transformations to the broader urban narrative of Yangon. Second, in terms of architectural significance: what architectural features define the building as a synthesis of colonial and regional design traditions? By examining elements such as high ceilings, wide verandas, lattice screens, and teak carvings, the research highlights how the structure integrates colonial engineering with Burmese, Chinese, and Indian influences. These features are evaluated for their aesthetic, cultural, and functional contributions, including passive cooling and spatial adaptability. Third, concerning adaptive reuse practices: what challenges and benefits arise from the adaptive reuse of the Goethe-Institut, and what lessons can its restoration offer for heritage conservation?

This question explores the complexities of preserving historical integrity while modernizing the building, addressing issues like structural decay, integration of modern utilities, and financial constraints. The study also evaluates the benefits of adaptive reuse, including environmental sustainability, community engagement, and cultural continuity.

By addressing these questions, the research demonstrates how adaptive reuse can preserve historical landmarks, foster cultural identity, and contribute to sustainable urban development. The study serves as a resource for architects, urban planners, and policymakers in balancing modernization with heritage preservation.

1.5 Objectives of the study

The objectives of this research are threefold. First, it aims to trace the historical evolution of the Goethe-Institut building and its role within Yangon's urban landscape. Second, it seeks to analyze the architectural features of the building, focusing on their cultural, functional, and symbolic significance. Third, it intends to evaluate the adaptive reuse strategies employed during the building's restoration, with particular emphasis on sustainability, community engagement, and heritage preservation.

By achieving these objectives, the study aims to highlight the transformative potential of adaptive reuse as a tool for heritage conservation and sustainable urban development. It emphasizes the importance of integrating historical context with modern functionality, offering valuable insights for architects, urban planners, and policymakers navigating the challenges of urbanization in developing cities.

2. Methods

2.1 Research design

This research adopts a qualitative and comparative approach to explore the architectural and cultural significance of the Goethe-Institut building. By integrating site observations, historical analysis, and an extensive literature review, the study examines the building's role in heritage conservation while positioning it within a global framework. The research design facilitates a comprehensive understanding of how the Goethe-Institut aligns with broader trends and principles in heritage conservation, particularly within the context of Southeast Asia.

2.2 Data collection

The data collection process was methodically structured into three interrelated components, ensuring a detailed and holistic examination of the Goethe-Institut building in the context of the city, Yangon, Myanmar.

2.2.1 Site observations

On-site visits to the Goethe-Institut building were conducted to document its architectural and design elements in detail. The study focused on key features, including the building's high ceilings, wide verandas, lattice screens, and intricately carved teak woodwork. These elements were analyzed in terms of their contributions to the building's environmental adaptability, functionality, and aesthetic quality. Observations also extended to assessing how these architectural attributes address challenges such as climate responsiveness and sustainable maintenance. Photographs were used to capture visual details, while field notes documented spatial arrangements, material usage, and the interplay between form and function.

2.2.2 Historical document analysis

The historical evolution of the Goethe-Institut building was meticulously reconstructed using a diverse range of archival materials. Government records, restoration reports, and documents from the Yangon Heritage Trust (Yangon Heritage Trust, n.d.) formed the foundation of this analysis, offering insights into the building's transformation over nearly a century. These records revealed pivotal moments, including its initial construction during the 1920s colonial era, its role as General Aung San's revolutionary headquarters in the 1940s, and its eventual restoration and repurposing as a cultural hub in 2014.

This analysis also explored colonial-era planning documents and case studies of similar heritage projects, situating the Goethe-Institut within Myanmar's broader architectural and sociopolitical history. By examining modifications and preservation efforts, the study illuminated the challenges of maintaining historical authenticity amidst urbanization pressures. These insights underscore the significance of adaptive reuse in bridging Yangon's rich past with its evolving urban landscape, offering valuable lessons for sustainable heritage conservation (Amro et al., 2023).

The literature review provided a theoretical foundation for the study, drawing on academic works related to colonial architecture, adaptive reuse, and sustainable heritage practices. Scholarly articles, books, and case studies from regional and international contexts were reviewed to identify common themes and challenges in heritage conservation. By synthesizing findings from diverse sources, the literature review informed a nuanced understanding of the Goethe-Institut building's conservation efforts and their implications for broader heritage practices.

2.3 Comparative case studies

Adaptive reuse practices vary widely across Southeast Asia, providing valuable comparative perspectives for this study. To deepen the understanding of the Goethe-Institut building's adaptive reuse, this research integrates a comparative analysis of similar projects from the region. This sub-section highlights two notable examples: *The Arts House* in Singapore and *The Blue Mansion* in Penang, Malaysia.

2.3.1 The arts house, Singapore

Originally built in 1827 as the residence of the Scottish merchant John Argyle Maxwell, the Arts House is Singapore's oldest government building. Over its history, it has served as a courthouse, legislative assembly, and now a multi-disciplinary arts venue. Key points of the adaptive reuse highlight a thoughtful and strategic approach to restoration. First, a minimal intervention approach was employed, with restoration efforts focusing on preserving the building's neoclassical elements while upgrading internal systems to accommodate contemporary functions (Eusterbrock, 2022). Second, modern utilities such as air-conditioning, lighting, and acoustic treatments were discreetly installed to ensure

functionality without detracting from the building's historical aesthetics. Third, the transformation of the space into a public arts venue significantly improved public accessibility and community engagement, aligning with the Goethe-Institut's cultural mission (Maha Shree J et al., 2024).

A comparative insight can be drawn with The Arts House, which, like the Goethe-Institut, exemplifies how historical buildings can be reanimated without compromising their architectural integrity. Both projects underscore the importance of cultural continuity and advocate for minimal physical alterations, demonstrating that heritage preservation and modern functionality can coexist harmoniously.

2.3.2 The blue mansion, Penang, Malaysia

The Blue Mansion, also known as the Cheong Fatt Tze Mansion, is a late-19th-century Chinese courtyard house that showcases a unique blend of Cantonese design elements and British colonial innovations. After decades of neglect, the building underwent extensive restoration in the 1990s and was successfully adapted into a boutique heritage hotel and museum (Bahauddin & Soon, 2018).

Key points of its adaptive reuse underscore several significant aspects. First, the mansion embodies a multicultural fusion, incorporating Chinese, European, and local Malay architectural influences—a feature that parallels the layered multicultural design found in the Goethe-Institut. Second, sustainability efforts were central to the restoration process, with traditional materials and techniques employed to maintain the building's historical authenticity. Third, the transformation of the mansion into a boutique hotel has played a vital role in revitalizing George Town's economy, particularly through heritage-driven tourism (Mydin et al., 2014).

A comparative insight reveals that both The Blue Mansion and the Goethe-Institut exemplify how adaptive reuse can serve as a catalyst for economic revitalization while preserving narratives of multicultural heritage. These cases illustrate the flexibility of adaptive reuse in fulfilling both cultural and commercial purposes, reinforcing the value of integrating historical preservation with contemporary functionality.

2.3.3 Synthesis of comparative insights

The comparative analysis of adaptive reuse projects in Southeast Asia highlights several shared strategic approaches and underlying principles that are instrumental in preserving architectural heritage. Despite varying historical contexts and end uses, the projects analyzed—namely, The Arts House in Singapore, The Blue Mansion in Penang, and the Goethe-Institut building in Yangon—exhibit a strong prioritization of historical authenticity. Each project demonstrates a commitment to retaining original materials and design features, ensuring that the building's historical narratives remain intact even as new functions are introduced. This adherence to authenticity aligns with the principle of "minimal intervention," a core concept in heritage conservation theory that advocates preserving as much of the original structure as possible without compromising its integrity (Jokilehto, 2017).

Functional adaptation emerges as another significant commonality across the case studies. Rather than preserving buildings as static monuments, these adaptive reuse projects creatively repurpose spaces to align with contemporary social and cultural needs. The Arts House was transformed into an arts center, the Blue Mansion into a boutique heritage hotel, and the Goethe-Institut into a cultural and educational hub. This dynamic approach reflects global trends in heritage conservation, where adaptive reuse is increasingly recognized as a strategy for ensuring the sustainable relevance of historic structures (Pendlebury, 2021).

Furthermore, the comparative cases underscore the importance of community and economic engagement in adaptive reuse practices. The Blue Mansion, for instance, has significantly contributed to Penang's tourism economy, while the Goethe-Institut and The

Arts House serve as active centers for cultural exchange and public education. These projects demonstrate that adaptive reuse can stimulate local economies and foster social cohesion when executed thoughtfully.

While these projects share common goals, they differ in the degree to which commercial imperatives influence their reuse strategies. The Goethe-Institut, prioritizing non-commercial cultural programming, contrasts with The Blue Mansion's model of commercial heritage tourism. Such distinctions highlight the necessity of tailoring adaptive reuse approaches to the specific cultural, economic, and social contexts of each site (Ibtissem & Meriama, 2024; ICOMOS, 2019).

In conclusion, comparative insights reveal that successful adaptive reuse projects balance respect for historical authenticity with functional modernization and community relevance. They illustrate that adaptive reuse is not a singular model but a flexible framework that must be adapted to the cultural narratives, economic conditions, and urban contexts of each unique heritage site. These findings resonate with broader global discussions on sustainable heritage management and the future of historic urban landscapes (Bandarin & van Oers, 2012; Vale, 2019).

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Evolution of the Goethe-Institut Building

As seen in Table 1., constructed in the 1920s, the Goethe-Institut building originally served as a private residence for a European family. In the 1930s, the property was purchased by Chan Chaw Paing, a prominent Chinese merchant, who introduced decorative elements such as lattice screens and carved wood panels, infusing the structure with Chinese cultural motifs.

During the 1940s, the building became the headquarters of General Aung San's Revolutionary Association, marking its transformation from a private residence into a politically significant site. From 1967 to 2006, it served as the High School of Art, playing a crucial role in fostering Myanmar's artistic community. Finally, in 2014, the building was restored and repurposed as the Goethe-Institut, a cultural hub dedicated to fostering cross-cultural dialogue and education.

Table 1. Historical timeline of the Goethe-Institut Building

Period	Use	Significance
1920s	Private colonial villa	Symbol of colonial engineering and design
1940s	Headquarters of the Revolutionary Association	Political significance in Myanmar's independence movement
1967–2006	High School of Art	Cultural and educational hub
2014–present	Goethe-Institut cultural center	Cross-cultural dialogue and education hub

3.2 Architectural features

The architectural features of the Goethe-Institut building reflect the confluence of colonial engineering principles and regional cultural aesthetics. These elements not only addressed the practical needs of living in a tropical climate but also symbolized the cultural and social identities of their owners (Li, 2024). This section explores the design elements in detail, including their functional, aesthetic, and symbolic roles, supported by theoretical insights and comparative examples.

3.2.1 Colonial design principles

One of the defining features of colonial-era architecture in tropical regions is the use of high ceilings. At the Goethe-Institut, the ceilings measure approximately 15 feet in height, contributing to effective passive cooling by creating vertical space for hot air to rise. This

feature is particularly vital in Yangon, where temperatures can reach oppressive levels during the dry season. Evidence from a study by Abercrombie & Lim (2020) demonstrates that buildings with high ceilings in Southeast Asia experience indoor temperature reductions of up to 5°C compared to low-ceiling structures.

Verandas are another key feature of colonial architecture in tropical climates. At the Goethe-Institut, wide verandas encircle the building, providing shade to interior spaces and reducing heat gain on the walls. These verandas also function as semi-outdoor spaces, where residents could gather, relax, or entertain guests, reflecting the social dynamics of colonial life.

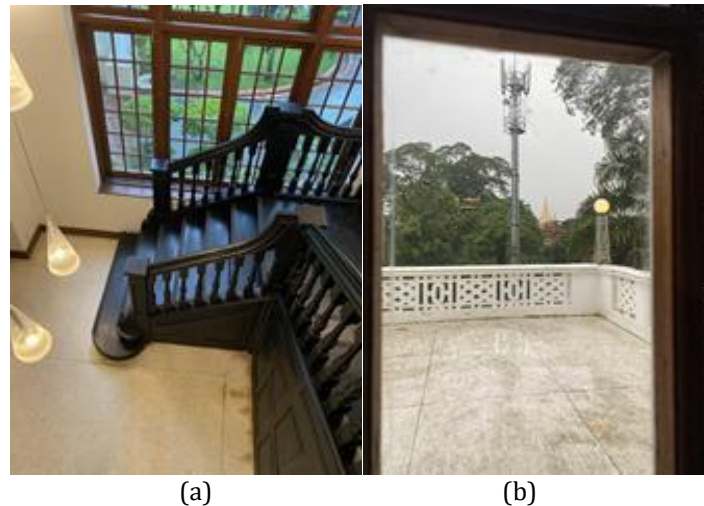


Fig. 3. (a) Ornate staircase, symmetrical wide window frames; (b) The wide balcony with a view of shwedagon pagoda

From a technical perspective, verandas act as thermal buffers, absorbing and dissipating heat before it reaches the interior. In tropical regions, this reduces the reliance on artificial cooling systems, aligning with modern sustainability goals. Yangon's monsoon season poses significant challenges for building durability, with frequent flooding and high humidity levels (Chang, 2016). The Goethe-Institut's elevated foundation addresses these issues by raising the living spaces above ground level, preventing water damage and reducing moisture-related problems like mold and termite infestations.

3.2.2 Multicultural design influences

While the Goethe-Institut's structural elements reflect colonial engineering, its decorative and aesthetic features draw heavily from the cultural traditions of Yangon's multicultural society.



Fig. 4. Interior decorations in the second floor of the Goethe Institut, Yangon

The intricate wooden lattice screens in the Goethe-Institut are a clear nod to Chinese architectural traditions. These screens, often carved with geometric and floral patterns, serve both functional and symbolic purposes. Functionally, lattice screens enhance ventilation and light diffusion while maintaining privacy, a critical feature in densely populated urban areas like colonial Yangon. Symbolically, in Chinese culture, lattice patterns often represent harmony, prosperity, and protection. The motifs used in the Goethe-Institut's screens reflect these cultural values, linking the building to its Chinese merchant owner, Chan Chaw Paing.



Fig. 5. (a) The Jali - or Jaali - Pattern used in the Design of the Verandah in Goethe Institut; (b) A Facade Design using Jali- or Jaali-Pattern from India (ArchDaily, 2024)

Another notable feature of the Goethe-Institut is its perforated jali screens, inspired by Mughal architecture. These intricately carved wooden screens, commonly used in Indian design, are both decorative and functional. Environmentally, jali screens allow for natural ventilation while filtering sunlight, effectively reducing heat gain and creating a cooling effect indoors.



Fig. 6. Teak carvings in a traditional burmese farmhouse in Kywe Chin Village near Naypyidaw, Myanmar (World Monuments Fund, 2017)

The extensive use of Burmese teak in the Goethe-Institut reflects the prominence of local materials and craftsmanship in colonial-era architecture. Teak was prized for its durability, termite resistance, and aesthetic qualities, making it an ideal choice for both structural and decorative elements (Narayanan, 2015). Burmese artisans adorned the building's doors, railings, and ceilings with intricate carvings, often depicting natural motifs like flowers, vines, and mythical creatures. These carvings add a layer of cultural identity to

the building, linking it to Myanmar's artistic heritage. Similar teak carvings can be seen in traditional Burmese houses and monasteries.

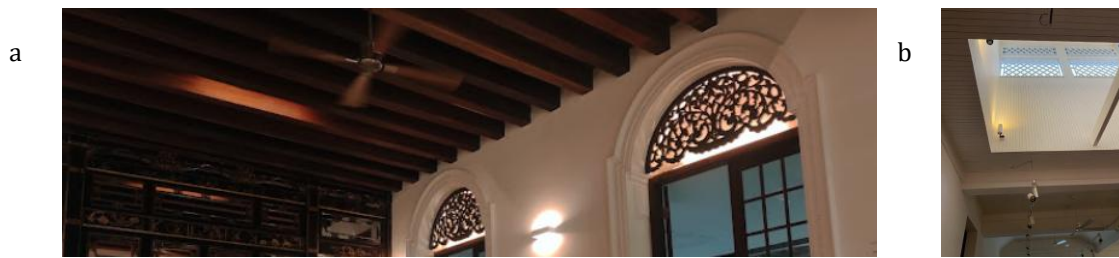


Fig. 7. (a) Burmese traditional way of flooring ; (b) The Skylight in the Ceiling of the Goethe Institut, Yangon

3.3 Sustainability of traditional design

As seen in Table 2, the architectural features of the Goethe-Institut demonstrate the sustainability of traditional design principles, many of which are being revisited in contemporary architecture. The combination of high ceilings, verandas, and jali screens creates an effective passive cooling system that minimizes reliance on artificial ventilation. Additionally, the use of Burmese teak reflects a sustainable approach to construction, relying on locally available materials with minimal environmental impact (Yapp, 2020).

Table 2. Architectural features of the Goethe-Institut and their cultural origins

Feature	Cultural Influence	Functional Purpose
High ceilings	Colonial	Enhanced air circulation and passive cooling
Lattice screens	Chinese	Ventilation, light diffusion, and privacy
Jali patterns	Indian	Shading, airflow, and aesthetic value
Teak carvings	Burmese	Structural durability and artistic significance
Wide verandas	Colonial	Protection from heat and rain

3.4 Adaptive reuse practices

Adaptive reuse involves repurposing existing buildings for new functions, preserving historical integrity while meeting modern needs. For the Goethe-Institut building, this approach transformed a colonial villa into a modern cultural hub, maintaining its historical significance. This section examines the challenges, strategies, and outcomes of the building's adaptive reuse, highlighting its role in sustainability, functionality, and cultural continuity.

3.4.1. Challenges of adaptive reuse

Adaptive reuse is inherently complex, requiring careful navigation of financial, technical, and ethical challenges. In the case of the Goethe-Institut building, several key challenges were encountered during the restoration process. First, decades of neglect had left the building in a state of significant disrepair. Key structural components, such as wooden beams and masonry walls, had deteriorated due to termite infestations, moisture infiltration, and general aging. Fortunately, the extensive use of teak wood, known for its high resistance to termites, helped minimize deterioration. However, termite damage still required comprehensive treatment of wooden components, particularly the Burmese teak used in the flooring and beams. Additionally, cracks and erosion in the masonry walls needed reinforcement to ensure structural stability while preserving original materials.

Second, the integration of modern utilities posed a considerable challenge. Retrofitting the historical structure with contemporary systems such as air conditioning, plumbing, and electrical wiring risked compromising its historical aesthetic. Specific challenges included concealing air-conditioning ducts without altering the visual impact of the high ceilings and

lattice screens, as well as introducing electrical and plumbing systems without damaging the decorative carvings and masonry. Ethically, the restoration team had to strike a careful balance between meeting functional demands and preserving the building's integrity, in adherence to the principle of minimal intervention.

Third, financial constraints played a significant role in shaping the project. The restoration relied on a combination of international partnerships, with financial and technical support provided by German cultural organizations. Additional funding was secured through public-private partnerships, highlighting the critical importance of collaborative efforts in successful heritage conservation initiatives.

3.4.2. Strategies for adaptive reuse

Despite the challenges, the Goethe-Institut restoration successfully preserved the building's historical features while transforming it into a functional cultural center. Several key strategies, as listed in Table 3, adaptive reuse strategies and outcomes, contributed to this successful outcome.

Table 3. Adaptive reuse strategies and outcomes

Strategy	Implementation	Outcome
Minimal intervention	Preservation and repair of original materials	Maintained historical authenticity
Functional zoning	Conversion of spaces into classrooms and galleries	Enhanced usability without disrupting the layout
Artisan engagement	Local craftsmen restored decorative features	Supported cultural continuity and employment
Sustainability practices	Reuse of materials and preservation of natural ventilation	Reduced environmental impact

One of the primary strategies was the adoption of a minimal intervention approach. The restoration team prioritized the preservation of original materials wherever possible. Teak carvings that had sustained minor damage were meticulously repaired using traditional hand-carving techniques by local artisans. Masonry walls were reinforced using lime-based mortar, which closely matched the composition of the original materials, ensuring both structural integrity and historical authenticity.

Another critical strategy was functional zoning. Former residential spaces were repurposed as classrooms for language instruction, furnished with modern desks and whiteboards to meet contemporary educational needs. The central hall, originally a formal gathering space, was adapted into an exhibition gallery for art and photography displays. Additionally, auxiliary buildings dating back to the High School of Art era were converted into a library and resource center, further enhancing the institute's educational offerings. Throughout this process, functional zoning was carefully planned to ensure that the introduction of new uses did not compromise the building's historical layout or decorative features.



Fig. 8. (a) Location of the new building in the campus of the Goethe Institut, Yangon ; (b) The new building known as the library of the Goethe Institut, Yangon

Another important strategy involved the engagement of local artisans. These craftsmen played a central role in the restoration process, particularly in repairing intricate decorative elements such as lattice screens, jali patterns, and carved teak panels. Their involvement not only ensured the cultural authenticity of the restoration but also provided valuable economic opportunities for the local community. Moreover, the project served as a platform for the preservation and transmission of traditional woodworking and masonry techniques, many of which are at risk of disappearing in contemporary Myanmar.

Sustainability practices were also integrated throughout the restoration. Reclaimed Burmese teak was utilized to replace irreparably damaged wooden components, thereby reducing the demand for newly harvested timber and supporting environmentally responsible sourcing. Natural ventilation systems, including high ceilings and verandas, were preserved to minimize reliance on air-conditioning. Additionally, energy-efficient lighting systems were installed to lower the building's operational carbon emissions, aligning the project with modern sustainability goals.

3.4.3. Benefits of adaptive reuse

Adaptive reuse of historic buildings offers significant environmental, economic, and social benefits. Life cycle assessments demonstrate substantial reductions in environmental impacts, including an 82% decrease in global warming potential and reductions in smog formation, acidification, and eutrophication (Ming & Jakub, 2024). This approach extends building lifespans, conserves resources, and reduces carbon footprints (Conejos et al., 2016). Adaptive reuse also preserves cultural heritage and promotes sustainable urban development (Bennet et al., 2024). It can stimulate tourism, create jobs, and enhance community engagement through participatory planning (Bennet et al., 2024). Successful implementation requires balancing historical preservation with improved sustainability and functionality (Ming & Jakub, 2024). Case studies, such as Haveli Dharampura in Old Delhi, demonstrate the transformative effects of adaptive reuse projects (Bennet et al., 2024). Overall, adaptive reuse emerges as a crucial strategy for mitigating environmental impacts in the construction sector while preserving architectural legacy (Langston, 2011).

The adaptive reuse of the Goethe-Institut building has yielded significant benefits, extending beyond the preservation of its architectural features to encompass social, cultural, and environmental impacts. Culturally, the project has ensured continuity by maintaining the building's historical integrity while repurposing it as a vibrant cultural hub. The Goethe-Institut now functions as a living monument to Yangon's multicultural heritage, with its preserved architectural elements serving as tangible links to the city's layered past. Its ongoing use guarantees that the narratives embedded within its walls remain relevant and accessible to future generations. From a social perspective, the institute has become a focal point for community engagement. It regularly hosts language courses, art exhibitions, and cultural events that foster dialogue, learning, and artistic expression among diverse audiences. This dynamic programming has transformed the space into an inclusive platform for cultural exchange.

Environmentally, the project reflects a strong commitment to sustainability. The reuse of original materials, such as Burmese teak, and the preservation of passive cooling features like high ceilings and wide verandas have significantly minimized the building's environmental footprint. These strategies demonstrate how heritage conservation can align with contemporary sustainability goals, reinforcing the relevance of traditional design principles in modern contexts.

3.5 Discussion

The adaptive reuse of the Goethe-Institut building highlights challenges, strategies, and implications of heritage conservation. This project provides lessons for Yangon and other cities facing urbanization. It is examined within frameworks like critical heritage studies, postcolonial architecture, and sustainable urban development.

3.5.1 Adaptive reuse as a model for sustainable heritage conservation

The Goethe-Institut building exemplifies how adaptive reuse can contribute to sustainable urban development by preserving architectural heritage, minimizing environmental impact, and promoting cultural identity.



Fig. 9. Goethe Institut logo

Adaptive reuse aligns closely with global sustainability objectives, particularly the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 11, which emphasizes the creation of sustainable cities and communities. The Goethe-Institut project exemplifies this alignment through its strategic reuse of existing materials, the preservation of natural ventilation systems, and the significant reduction of construction waste. These practices demonstrate how heritage conservation can be integrated into broader efforts to mitigate environmental impact and promote resource efficiency.

Beyond its environmental contributions, the adaptive reuse of the Goethe-Institut building also yields substantial economic benefits. By repurposing the existing structure, the project avoided the high financial costs typically associated with demolition and new construction. Additionally, the building's transformation into a cultural hub stimulates continuous economic activity by attracting visitors, organizing public events, and supporting local artists and cultural practitioners. This dual impact underscores the value of adaptive reuse as a sustainable and economically viable approach to urban development.

3.5.2 Multicultural identity and postcolonial narratives

The architectural features of the Goethe-Institut reflect Yangon's multicultural history, blending colonial engineering with Burmese, Chinese, and Indian design traditions. This fusion serves as a tangible representation of the city's diverse cultural heritage, challenging simplistic narratives of colonial domination and indigenous resistance.

One of the key aspects of this building is its multicultural architectural fusion. The Goethe-Institut's design integrates elements from multiple cultural traditions, resulting in a hybrid architectural style that mirrors the cosmopolitan character of colonial Yangon. Colonial features such as high ceilings and wide verandas reflect British engineering responses to the tropical climate, while Chinese influences are evident in the lattice screens and geometric patterns, symbolizing the cultural identity of the building's original Chinese owner. Indian contributions appear through the presence of jali patterns, which provide both aesthetic appeal and practical climate adaptation, showcasing the legacy of Mughal craftsmanship. Burmese teak carvings further highlight the essential role of local artisans in shaping the building's character. This blending of cultural elements challenges Eurocentric interpretations that frame colonial architecture as solely Western in origin, instead underscoring the collaborative and intercultural processes at work in architectural development during the colonial era (Roberts, 2018).

From a postcolonial perspective, the adaptive reuse of the Goethe-Institut building may also be viewed as an act of reclaiming and redefining historical narratives. By preserving and transforming a colonial-era structure into a cultural center that celebrates Myanmar's

artistic and intellectual life, the project subverts its original associations with colonial authority. In doing so, it repositions the space as one that fosters cross-cultural dialogue and affirms local identity, reflecting a broader shift toward inclusive heritage practices in postcolonial societies.

3.5.3 Community engagement and social impact

The Goethe-Institut's adaptive reuse highlights the value of community involvement in heritage conservation. Engaging Burmese artisans preserved traditional techniques while creating local economic opportunities. As a cultural hub, it fosters dialogue and collaboration through events that unite artists, educators, and the community, promoting social cohesion and cultural vitality.

3.5.4 Lessons for urban heritage conservation

The Goethe-Institut offers valuable insights for heritage conservation, particularly within urban contexts. First, its adaptive reuse demonstrates the importance of balancing historical integrity with modern functionality—a goal achieved through minimal intervention and strategic planning. Second, the preservation of traditional passive cooling systems, alongside the use of reclaimed materials, illustrates how conservation efforts can align with broader environmental sustainability objectives. Third, the active involvement of local stakeholders throughout the restoration process ensures cultural continuity and reinforces the relevance of heritage buildings in contemporary society. Finally, acknowledging and preserving the site's multicultural architectural features enriches both the interpretation and the cultural significance of the heritage site, highlighting the diverse narratives embedded within its structure.

3.6 Comparative analysis with regional projects

While the Goethe-Institut building in Yangon exemplifies successful adaptive reuse within a multicultural and postcolonial context, comparative analysis with other projects in Southeast Asia provides broader insights into shared challenges, strategies, and outcomes in heritage conservation. This section compares the Goethe-Institut with three notable cases: The Arts House in Singapore, The Blue Mansion in Penang, Malaysia, and the Bangkok General Post Office in Thailand.

3.6.1 The arts house, Singapore

The Arts House, initially constructed as a private residence in 1827 and later repurposed as a courthouse and government building, underwent adaptive reuse in 2004 to become an arts center. This transformation involved several strategic approaches. Minimal structural alterations were made, preserving the building's original neoclassical architecture. At the same time, contemporary facilities for performance and exhibition were seamlessly integrated without compromising its historical aesthetics. The venue actively engages the community through cultural programming, hosting literary festivals, exhibitions, and performances. In comparison to the Goethe-Institut, The Arts House similarly blends historical authenticity with contemporary cultural functions, placing emphasis on public accessibility and intellectual enrichment, as illustrated in Fig. 10 below.

Fig. 10 visually illustrates the neoclassical architecture of The Arts House, highlighting its preserved façade and structural proportions. This image reinforces the discussion on minimal intervention strategies, where historical authenticity is maintained even as new cultural functions are integrated within the building.



Fig. 10. The art house Singapore

The Blue Mansion in Penang, Malaysia, built in the late 19th century by Chinese merchant Cheong Fatt Tze, embodies a unique synthesis of Chinese, European, and Malay architectural styles. Its adaptive reuse involved restoration using traditional methods, with skilled artisans employing century-old techniques to preserve the mansion's original fabric. The building's new function as a heritage hotel and museum has contributed to the revitalization of the local economy. In contrast to the Goethe-Institut, which operates as a non-commercial cultural center, The Blue Mansion leverages heritage tourism. Nevertheless, both projects share a strong emphasis on preserving multicultural identity and architectural authenticity as central goals of adaptive reuse.



Fig. 11. The Blue Mansion, Penang

Fig. 11 presents the distinct hybrid aesthetic of The Blue Mansion, characterized by its vibrant indigo exterior and intricate Chinese-European architectural fusion. The image supports the analysis of multicultural layering in adaptive reuse projects, showcasing how traditional craftsmanship can be revitalized for contemporary economic purposes through heritage tourism.

3.6.3 Bangkok general post office, Thailand

Completed in 1940, the Bangkok General Post Office showcases Art Deco architectural styles and originally stood as a symbol of national modernization. Its adaptive reuse followed a hybrid preservation approach, wherein some historical sections were carefully preserved while others underwent extensive modifications. The building has been functionally transformed into a creative design center and event space, aligning with

contemporary urban demands. In contrast to the Goethe-Institut's minimal intervention approach, the Bangkok project prioritized extensive modernization, reflecting a greater emphasis on functionality over historical preservation, as illustrated in Fig. 12 below.



Fig. 12. Bangkok General Post Office

Fig. 12 depicts the monumental Art Deco style of the Bangkok General Post Office, symbolizing the modernization efforts of early 20th-century Thailand. This visual aids the understanding of how adaptive reuse projects like this balance the preservation of historical identity with extensive functional modernization to meet contemporary creative industry needs.

3.6.4 Synthesis of comparative lessons

The comparative analysis of adaptive reuse projects across Southeast Asia reveals several consistent strategies and challenges in conserving urban heritage buildings. These findings provide valuable insights into how different historical sites are adapted and revitalized while preserving their cultural significance.

A recurring theme across all case studies is the tension between preservation and modernization. Adaptive reuse requires a delicate balance between maintaining the historical authenticity of a building and integrating the modern functions necessary for contemporary use. Both the Goethe-Institut in Yangon and The Arts House in Singapore successfully demonstrate minimal intervention strategies, ensuring that original architectural features remain prominent while subtly incorporating modern amenities such as lighting, air-conditioning, and multimedia facilities. In contrast, the Bangkok General Post Office underwent more extensive modifications, suggesting that functional adaptation sometimes necessitates greater structural compromises, especially when catering to larger audiences or commercial functions.

Another significant theme is the emphasis on cultural continuity and multicultural expression (UNESCO, 2011). Buildings like the Goethe-Institut and The Blue Mansion in Penang exemplify how architectural heritage can encapsulate multiple cultural layers. The Goethe-Institut's blend of colonial, Burmese, Chinese, and Indian influences parallels The Blue Mansion's synthesis of Chinese and European styles. Such multicultural integration reinforces postcolonial narratives and showcases how architectural heritage can serve as a testament to the historical diversity of Southeast Asian cities.

Economic and social relevance also emerges as a vital consideration. Projects like The Blue Mansion have leveraged their historical appeal to drive heritage tourism and economic revitalization, illustrating the potential of adaptive reuse to stimulate local economies. Meanwhile, institutions like the Goethe-Institut and The Arts House prioritize educational, artistic, and community-oriented functions, highlighting the role of adaptive reuse in enriching cultural life and fostering social engagement without necessarily prioritizing commercial profit.

The adaptive strategies employed across these cases emphasize respect for original materials and design wherever possible. Minimal intervention approaches, as seen in Yangon and Singapore, prioritize authenticity, while hybrid approaches, like that of the Bangkok General Post Office, demonstrate that modernization can be harmonized with preservation efforts when carefully managed. These comparative insights affirm that successful adaptive reuse is context-dependent, requiring sensitivity to both the historical significance of the structure and the contemporary needs of its users.

Table 4. Comparative analysis of adaptive reuse projects in Southeast Asia

Project	Original Use	Current Use	Strategy Focus	Main Challenge
Goethe-Institut, Yangon	Private residence	Cultural institute	Minimal intervention, multicultural preservation	Balancing modern needs with authenticity
The Arts House, Singapore	Private residence → Courthouse	Arts center	Functional adaptation, community engagement	Integrating modern facilities invisibly
The Blue Mansion, Penang	Merchant's residence	Heritage hotel & museum	Traditional restoration, economic revitalization	Maintaining authenticity while commercializing
Bangkok General Post Office	Post office	Creative design center	Hybrid preservation and modernization	Extensive functional modifications

The comparative analysis presented in Table 4 highlights the diversity of adaptive reuse strategies applied to heritage buildings across Southeast Asia. The Goethe-Institut in Yangon and The Arts House in Singapore exemplify a minimal intervention approach, where the original architectural fabric is carefully preserved while modern functions are introduced subtly. Both cases prioritize cultural continuity and public engagement, showcasing how heritage sites can be revitalized without compromising their historical authenticity. In contrast, The Blue Mansion in Penang, while maintaining its architectural integrity, adopts a commercial model by converting into a heritage hotel and museum, thereby contributing significantly to local economic revitalization. The Bangkok General Post Office demonstrates a hybrid strategy, balancing preservation with extensive modernization to accommodate contemporary creative industries. Despite their differences, all projects reflect a shared understanding that successful adaptive reuse must navigate the tension between conserving the past and adapting to present needs. This synthesis underscores the importance of context-specific approaches, where cultural significance, functional requirements, and economic sustainability are carefully balanced to ensure the long-term relevance of heritage sites.

3.6.5 Key takeaways for urban heritage conservation

The comparative analysis of adaptive reuse projects across Southeast Asia reveals several critical lessons for urban heritage conservation. One of the most significant insights is the value of multifunctional adaptations (Saarinen, 2006). Successful projects demonstrate that heritage buildings can serve diverse contemporary needs while preserving their historical essence (UNESCO, 2020). By aligning new functions with the cultural and social fabric of the community, adaptive reuse ensures that heritage structures remain active contributors to urban life rather than isolated monuments of the past.

Equally important is the respect for the original fabric of the building. Case studies such as the Goethe-Institut in Yangon and The Arts House in Singapore exemplify how the preservation of original materials and design elements can coexist with the integration of modern amenities. These projects show that sensitive interventions, guided by principles of minimal alteration, can maintain the authenticity of heritage sites while accommodating evolving functional demands (Li, 2024).

The role of multicultural layering also emerges as a central theme. The integration of diverse cultural influences, particularly evident in projects like the Goethe-Institut and The Blue Mansion in Penang, enriches the historical narratives embedded within the built environment. Such multicultural expressions not only enhance the architectural character of heritage buildings but also strengthen postcolonial identities, offering a more inclusive and complex understanding of history.

Finally, sustainability synergies are a crucial aspect of adaptive reuse. Projects that prioritize the conservation of traditional cooling systems, the use of local materials, and the reduction of construction waste demonstrate how heritage conservation can contribute directly to broader environmental goals. By aligning adaptive reuse strategies with contemporary sustainability principles, these projects exemplify how heritage preservation can be a forward-looking practice that addresses the challenges of climate change and urban resilience.

In sum, the case of the Goethe-Institut, alongside regional comparators, illustrates that adaptive reuse is a flexible and dynamic tool for urban heritage conservation. It requires careful balancing of historical integrity, contemporary functionality, cultural representation, and environmental responsibility. These lessons are increasingly vital as cities across Southeast Asia and beyond grapple with the pressures of modernization and the imperative to preserve their unique cultural landscapes.

From this comparative analysis, several key lessons emerge. Successful projects combine heritage preservation with new, community-oriented functions, ensuring relevance to contemporary society. Projects like the Goethe-Institut and The Arts House demonstrate the feasibility of preserving original materials while updating building systems, reflecting a respect for the original fabric. The integration of diverse cultural influences, evident in Yangon and Penang, adds depth to heritage narratives and strengthens postcolonial identity claims through multicultural layering. Adaptive reuse projects also reduce construction waste and promote traditional sustainable practices like passive cooling and the use of local materials, showing sustainability synergies. Thus, the Goethe-Institut building not only aligns with regional best practices but also highlights the specific importance of cultural programming and minimal intervention as strategies for urban heritage conservation in postcolonial cities.

4. Conclusions

The Goethe-Institut building in Yangon serves as a compelling example of how adaptive reuse can successfully bridge the past and the present within a rapidly urbanizing context. Originally constructed in the 1920s, the building has undergone several functional transformations, from a private colonial residence to a revolutionary headquarters, an educational institution, and now a cultural hub. These shifts mirror Myanmar's broader socio-political changes over the past century. Through careful restoration and adaptive reuse strategies, the building has retained its architectural integrity while fulfilling contemporary cultural and educational needs.

The architectural analysis of the Goethe-Institut highlights the building's role as a synthesis of colonial engineering and regional artistic traditions. Features such as high ceilings, wide verandas, Chinese lattice screens, Indian jali patterns, and Burmese teak carvings collectively embody the multicultural identity of Yangon's historical urban landscape. By maintaining these features, the restoration project not only preserved aesthetic and historical values but also demonstrated the environmental sustainability inherent in traditional design, such as passive cooling systems and the use of locally sourced, durable materials.

The adaptive reuse of the Goethe-Institut also illustrates broader benefits beyond architectural conservation. The project has contributed to community engagement by serving as a center for cultural exchange, education, and artistic expression. Furthermore, by minimizing the need for demolition and new construction, the adaptive reuse process aligns with global sustainability goals, particularly in reducing environmental impact and

promoting the sustainable use of resources. These outcomes demonstrate the role of heritage conservation in fostering social cohesion, cultural continuity, and urban resilience.

In conclusion, the Goethe-Institut building stands as a model for integrating historical authenticity with modern functionality. Its adaptive reuse highlights the transformative potential of heritage conservation practices, offering valuable insights for architects, urban planners, and policymakers. The case emphasizes the need to balance modernization pressures with the preservation of historical narratives, ensuring that cities can grow and evolve without losing their cultural foundations. As urbanization accelerates across Southeast Asia, the lessons drawn from the Goethe-Institut reaffirm the critical importance of conserving architectural heritage as a vital component of sustainable and inclusive urban development.

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Author Contribution

The author, M.T.W. (Buddy Winn), conducted all aspects of the research, including conceptualization, data collection through site observation and literature review, analysis of architectural features, and drafting the manuscript. Dr. Eko Nursanty, ST., MT., contributed through her critical supervision, providing academic insights, and reviewing the manuscript to ensure its coherence and scholarly quality. All contributions were vital in producing the final version of this paper.

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