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The Merits of Rebuilding Bagan.  
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A mass renovation of monuments at Bagan, Myanmar's medieval Buddhist capital, has seen more than a thousand religious structures rebuilt, sometimes from the ground up, over the past two years. This represents almost half of the 2237 buildings recorded as still existing in the city in modern times. In many cases, ruined piles of rubble have been speculatively reconstructed on the basis of similarity to other buildings with the same layout. The result in some parts of the 70 square kilometre site is a panorama of new buildings, in the form of the old.

One major specialist in Burma's art history, Donald Stadtner, has suggested that the changes are so dramatic, and in some cases inaccurate, that they could disqualify Bagan from World Heritage Listing, and the international funding that would come with it. The rebuilding program at Bagan is also unabashedly sponsored at the highest levels of Myanmar's military government. In *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics*, Gustaaf Houtman strongly criticises the renovation and construction of pagodas, museums, palaces and ancient monasteries as an attempt to legitimise the regime, both domestically and internationally.

While the restoration program at Bagan is certainly linked to Myanmar's international image, and its domestic self-image, culturally expressed forms of nationalism can be detected in every society, including the former Burma. And aesthetic judgement must surely be relative in the case of a living Buddhist site. The current restoration program at Bagan came from a 1998 government appeal for individual or corporate donors to restore 287 deteriorated buildings, and to effectively reconstruct 890 ruins. The all-new buildings are made of modern brick, different in size and texture from medieval brick. Where buildings are partially reconstructed, the new work is also apparent. This is not the first coordinated program of restoration at Bagan in modern times. Much work was done in conjunction with UNESCO following a severe earthquake in 1975. However the 1988-2000 rebuilding program is the first time the entire city has been offered for Buddhist donors to make religious merit in return for sponsorship.

Over the centuries at Bagan, fires, floods, at least 9 recorded earthquakes, trees of the *ficus* family and general weathering have caused mechanical damage to buildings. Treasure-seekers and robbers broke into pagodas or bored holes into images in search of precious objects. The 1742-1754 AD war between the kingdoms of Ava to the north, and Pegu to the south, left Bagan a staging camp for soldiers of both sides, deserted by much of its population, and vulnerable to pillaging from the warring armies or bandits. The latter description could fit a German adventurer called Thomann, who in 1899 removed murals from Bagan which eventually turned up in the Hamburg Ethnographical Museum. He may have believed that his actions were quite within the spirit of scientific investigation, as he later wrote a beautifully illustrated book on the city. Until the advent of heritage management, there was often a lack of concern locally for the city's architectural integrity. By the early part of this century, for example, Bagan's only all-stone building had completely disappeared, quarried for road fill and other purposes.

Parallel to the damage, restoration of buildings or their contents has been common at Bagan since medieval times. Repairs were reported as early as 1212 AD, and more than 20 instances of "making

new” were documented in the 15<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Foreign visitors reported restorations in progress or recently completed in the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century. By the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, criticism of restoration efforts frequently focused on the activities of temple committees, who made random repairs, added gilding, and liked to whitewash buildings inside and out, as Buddhists across Myanmar still do. The Ananda, a major temple just east of Bagan’s city core, appears to have fallen victim to this penchant for whitewashing, and lost its interior wall decorations. Such repairs were criticised by Burmese administrators as well as European archaeologists. U Bo Kay, a director of archaeology at Bagan in the 1970s, was particularly scornful of the renovation efforts of his “superstitious” fellow Buddhists.

One argument current in Bagan relates to the installation of the *hti*, a concentric, cone-shaped metal “umbrella” on the pinnacle of a pagoda. This is the common style across Myanmar. Medieval plaques and wall paintings at Bagan show that buildings there were topped with solid, lotus-bud finials, rather than *hti*. The current director of archaeology at Bagan has at times replaced *hti*, much to the disappointment of donors and temple committees, with more authentic but less popular solid tops. The director, U Aung Kyaing, has made it clear to visiting academics and reporters that responsibility for the detail of restoration rests on him and his staff. He says it is not dictated from higher levels of government.

The most sympathetic supporter of the right of the stakeholders in a living Buddhist site to make their own decisions about its future will still find points of disagreement at Bagan. A monument where the quest for authenticity appears to have run into technical problems is the “Giant’s Ear Ornament” pagoda, which supposedly resembles the ceramic ear plugs that were in fashion in the medieval period. Conservation of this stupa, which was earlier strapped with iron bands to protect it from deterioration, turned to restoration in 1998, with a brick finial put on. The alkali from the mortar appears to have since caused the green glazed bricks with which the stupa is faced to lose more of their already fading gloss.

At times restoration verges on Disneyfication. One of the largest buildings in the program was the Pya Tha Da. This huge box-shaped brick temple was left incomplete in medieval times, and as recently as 1996 had no Buddha images in it, suggesting that it had never been consecrated. By 1999, a consortium of donors led by Buddhists from Singapore had paid for a fanciful topping, consisting of a small upper temple and some gold-tipped spires that do not have the same dimensions as those of comparable temples. The temple is also now supplied with modern brick and plaster Buddha images. In another extreme example, the re-plastering and painting of three standing figures of Visnu on the exterior face of the central sanctum of the Nat Hlaung Kyaung Hindu Temple has left one of the previously four-armed Visnus with six arms, all with imaginary attributes. This kind of work is sometimes done by the donors themselves, whose skills may not extend to art history.

Myanmar’s world heritage nomination of Bagan is currently deferred due to site management concerns, including the need to provide and enforce a buffer zone around the core protected area. UNESCO is also dubious about a major road which cuts across the site, and the intrusion of a golf course. However last December, there was movement in Bagan’s case, with US \$30,000 allocated by UNESCO for the preparation of a management plan. At the time of writing there was no UNESCO pronouncement on the rebuilding program. The World Heritage Convention provides ambivalent guidelines. On the one hand, it says that reconstruction is only acceptable if carried out on the basis of complete and detailed documentation on the original, and to no extent on conjecture. On the other, the WHC’s notion of a valid heritage site as one which retains an active social role in contemporary society would appear to be strongly applicable to Bagan.

The role of a Buddhist centre comes back to merit making and the autonomy, within a negotiated social and aesthetic framework, of the donor. I was recently invited to the rededication of a small 13<sup>th</sup> century monument, rebuilt from a mound of rubble at the behest of one such donor. The contractor and designer was a former draughtsman from the archaeology department at Bagan, who is now thriving in private enterprise. The donor was a doctor from Yangon. She and members of her family arrived with a group of monks, who blessed the pagoda. The mini-temple was just big enough to hold the five monks, who had to bend almost double to fit through its tiny doorway. After the monks left, the donor's nephew and the contractor climbed a ladder to install and seal in the appropriate relics in a chamber near the top of the stupa. U Aung Kyaing has put a well-publicised ban on enshrining money or jewellery, which some donors would like to do, but which has attracted thieves. He was there with a reference card that showed how the relics, which included bronze images of Buddha and of the tree under which he attained enlightenment, should be orientated. Just as the ancient kings at Bagan are recorded as strewing gold and silver parched corn, the donors threw popcorn and money, a handful of one kyat notes worth about a third of a US cent each. The workers and a few local people were obviously familiar with this custom, and snapped up the cash, a very practical way of sharing the merit of the occasion. The elderly doctor and her relatives then went back to Yangon, with a small temple, but a temple nonetheless, forever in her name; an event of major significance to her spiritual status as a Buddhist. And I was left to ponder the relativist case for rebuilding Bagan.

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