

## – SECURING URBAN FRONTIERS: A View from Yangon, Myanmar

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### **Abstract**

*This article examines how variegated local and transnational interactions are reconfiguring Myanmar's largest city of Yangon. We do this through an analytical focus on frontiers and an empirical focus on how these are secured, drawing on interviews at two Security Expos and street-level observations in Yangon conducted over three years. Yangon thereby becomes a site for critical reflections about complex and multiple imbrications of frontiers, security and the urban with implications for how these may be conceptualized elsewhere.*

'Built from historical models of European conquest, frontiers create wildness so that some—and not others—may reap its rewards .... [T]hey arise in the interstitial spaces made by collaborations among legitimate and illegitimate partners: armies and bandits; gangsters and corporations; builders and despoilers. They confuse the boundaries of law and theft, governance and violence, use and destruction. These confusions change the rules and thus enable extravagant new economies of profit—as well as loss'.  
Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (2005: 27–8)

### **Introduction: multiple urban frontiers**

Scholars of the urban have long had recourse to and/or scrutinized frontier narratives. Robert Wade (1959) studied how American cities mobilized the dynamic forces of the nineteenth-century American frontier. Elvin Wyly (2018: 1) comments that the frontier of suburbanization has been studied for many years in the Global North, especially the United States, adding that 'Today, that frontier is a diverse, transnational process, shaping the settlement fabric of every part of the globe, especially in the Global South and East'.

More than 30 years ago, as part of his wider critical work on gentrification, Neil Smith (1986) signalled how frontier creeds, originally formulated in settler colonialism, were reworked in urban America of the 1970s through back-to-the-city moves for capital that accompanied gentrification. Politics, processes and consequences of gentrification continue to be examined in diverse sites, negotiating Smith's landmark works (Lees *et al.*, 2016). Amongst these, drawing on the case of Beirut, Hiba Bou Akar (2018) examines the interactions of sectarian and gentrification frontiers. Urban frontiers acquire a particular legibility too in cases of occupation, such as Cyprus and Palestine (Amit and Yiftachel, 2016). Boodrookas and Keshavarzian (2019) similarly historicize the trajectory of Persian Gulf cities reading them through postcolonial and comparative lenses as 'The Forever Frontier'. Others have mapped the processes whereby the 'Global City Frontiers' of Singapore extended into a contested hinterland in proximate parts

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of Indonesia (Bunnell *et al.*, 2006). More recently Bunnell (2018: 12) flags how area studies and demographic scholarship on Southeast Asia has long sought to go beyond binaries of urban and rural in examining the interconnected frontiers of socio-spatial transformations in the region. Meanwhile, debates about ‘planetary urbanization’ have hinged on the idea that the frontier of urbanization should not be limited to the physical boundary of cities, but extend into a wide range of hinterworlds that are so deeply connected to cities that urbanization’s boundaries have blurred. Urbanization becomes worldwide (hence planetary) in scope (Brenner and Schmid, 2012). The frontiers of the urban are held to extend into the oceans, mines, agriculture and airspace. This resituates cities within extensive processes—operational landscapes—of capital, labour and commodity circulation and extraction, critically extending the frontiers of urbanization to the planet’s peripheries. These problematize ideas of ‘a neat boundary between city and non-city spaces in a world of increasingly generalized urbanization and rapidly imploding/exploding urban transformations’ (Brenner, 2018: 574).

It is evident, therefore, that there are multiple aspects to thinking about frontiers and the urban, which include interactions between gentrification, imperial histories and globalization and the interface between states, nature and capital. Frontiers internalize relationships between transformation and force or, as Sivaramakrishnan (2019: 133) conceptualizes this in an essay on ‘Assembling Frontier Urbanizations’: ‘frontier ... indicates both exploitation and creation’. Security is at the heart of these interactions. In other words, frontiers have to be secured, be they the frontiers of gentrification within the city, or resource frontiers. This relates to how ‘security’—as defined by states and an allied apparatus of private security providers—is a key moment in the wider production of space. Lucia Zedner (2009: 9) describes security as ‘a promiscuous concept ... wantonly deployed in fields as diverse as social security, health and safety, financial security, policing and community safety, national security, military security, human security, environmental security, international relations and peacekeeping’. A lively literature focused on cities, security, socio-spatial fragmentations and urban geopolitics has developed, further catalysed by the post 9/11 contexts (Caldeira, 2000; Avant, 2005; Abrahamsen and Williams, 2007; Graham, 2010; Fawaz and Bou Aker, 2012; Jaffe, 2017; Rokem *et al.*, 2017; Pasquetti, 2019), asking who, what and where is being secured and with what consequences? Informed by that literature, our focus here is on the relationship of security—police and, especially, private security guards—to wider reconfigurations of the urban, viewed from downtown Yangon, the largest city in, and commercial capital of, Myanmar.<sup>1</sup>

Drawing on the case of the Gulf of Aden, Zoltán Glück (2015: 644) interprets, ‘the production of security space: that is, the production of secure spaces for the circulation of certain “desirable” elements [such as commodities and capital] ... and the suppression of other “undesirable elements” [disorder and the and the interruption of capital flows]’ as essential to the circulation of goods and money and hence capital accumulation. Although Glück analyses this through the lens of maritime flows, the production of security space as an essential moment in capital circulation is also starkly legible in Yangon. Specifically, the article examines the intersections of urban frontiers and security through two modes of empirical inquiry in Yangon. These methods work in dialogue, informing each other. Firstly, we study how the private security sector has

1 We use Myanmar to refer to the naming of the country after 1989 (reflecting official policy) and Burma for earlier periods. Likewise, Rangoon and Yangon. The use of these terms in material we cite from varies. The use of Burma or Myanmar acquired political overtones after the 1988 coup (Dittmer, 2010; Aung-Thwin and Aung-Thwin, 2012). We use them here simply following the official stance. It should be added that Yangon is no longer Myanmar’s capital city. In November 2005, the then military government (without prior formal announcement) relocated the capital (and hence ministries) to a new purpose-built city (Naypyidaw) over 300 kilometres to the north. This defensible site lies outside our focus here. However, the move is both symptomatic of the state’s security concerns and yielded opportunities for redevelopment of vacated public buildings in downtown Yangon.

developed by profiling Myanmar's first Security Expo (held in 2015)<sup>2</sup> and important players in that sector; secondly, we transect the historic core of the city (in downtown) Yangon, encountering on the streets many of the firms we met first at the Expo. Along the way, we also garner information on and tabulate details of the ownership of key sites in downtown Yangon (see Table 1) illustrating the relationships between urbanized capital, security and frontiers.

Myanmar, envisaged as the meeting place of China and India and thence 'the new crossroads of Asia' (Thant, 2011) is being scripted as a generic frontier market and surveyed for investment opportunities. Its commercial capital of Yangon has concurrently seen an explosion of other forms of surveillance with a proliferating private security industry, involving uniformed guards, closed-circuit cameras and plush gentrification. Our focus is on sites where these trajectories manifest in the redevelopment of what was the waterfront imperial node within Burma's commodity-orientated polity, but which went into steep and profound decline in the postcolonial era. Throughout we focus on the transformation of the historic core; the buildings and grid of streets immediately behind the Yangon River. Many other sites in Yangon could serve as localities for critical investigation. New building sites and redevelopments are found throughout the city and on its peripheries. However, the former colonial core is a locality where the relationship between new and old urban frontiers becomes markedly legible. We therefore focus on the district depicted in Figure 1.

The article, therefore, draws on multiple engagements with Yangon between September 2015 and October 2018, starting at the first Security Expo where we were able to conduct 40 interviews with security companies on their operations in Myanmar. Beyond that, through the course of seven visits amounting to four months in the city, we repeatedly engaged with Yangon's street-level security, through numerous daily interactions and via walking defined transects where we observed how key urban core sites including, malls, police stations, hotels, ministries and court houses are secured. These street-level transects in downtown Yangon were first staged in March 2016 and were repeated on each subsequent visit to the city at different times of the day and evening until our last visit in October 2018. They draw on methods of transecting urban space utilized in three other postcolonial cities; Maputo, Phnom Penh and Erbil (Paasche and Sidaway, 2010; 2015; Sidaway *et al.* 2014a) to map publicly visible manifestations of security and their relationships to the wider city and polity. Of course, walking and writing about cities has a long pedigree and we are intersecting with countless denizens of Yangon as we walk. Writing from Johannesburg, Simone (2004: 421) describes 'a complex geography that residents must navigate according to a finely tuned series of movements and assumptions'. That long history of writing about walking cities and similar navigations by those we encounter must remain beyond the scope of this article, although it uses the walking transects as a narrative strategy to map the intersections of security, redevelopment and power. The transects are supplemented by data on the recent histories of key buildings—banks, malls, hotels, and selected real estate developments (summarized in Table 1)— and who owns them, compiled through a combination of publicly available documentation and conversations with contacts in Yangon. We are mindful of the connections that Table 1 describes as we traverse downtown Yangon. Yangon's transformations, specifically its urban redevelopment process, tangibly reflect connections with exploitive and frequently conflicted frontier resource economies of gems, minerals, narcotics, timber and teak by a handful of cronies (linked to the *Tatmadaw*—Myanmar's armed forces and an array of allied

2 The first Myanmar Security Expo was held in Yangon from 30 September to 2 October 2015. A second such Expo was held in September 2016, but the third, originally scheduled for November 2017 was postponed to October 2018. We also attended the October 2018 event.

**TABLE 1** Ownership of key sites in downtown Yangon**1 Sule Shangri La (former Traders hotel)**

Owned by Asia World, led by Lou Hsing Han's son Stephan Law and his Singaporean wife Cecilia Ng. Their expansion was aided by the International Finance Corporation. In Yangon, their projects include a supermarket chain, office towers, condominiums, development of Yangon International Airport and road construction. Asia World also operates Yangon's Ahlone port, the Thilawa Special Economic Zone (on the outskirts of Yangon, this became operational in September 2015), and was involved with the controversial Myitsone Dam project. Lou Hsing Han was close to Ne Win.

**2 Yoma/ FMI Developments**

Owned by the Serge Pun and Associates/First Myanmar Investment (SPA/FMI), who also owns FMI and Yoma Strategic Holdings Ltd (YSHL). Most of Pun's businesses are listed in Singapore and Hong Kong. In Yangon, their projects include the Yoma Bank and gated residential communities Star City and the Pun Hlaing Golf Resort. Also involved in the Thilawa Special Economic Zone development. From an ethnic Chinese family who fled to China in 1965. Now he has strong ties with the NLD leadership. FMI were the first company to be listed on the Yangon Stock Exchange when trading commenced on 25 March 2016.

**3 ADG Bank and Air Bagan offices**

Owned by U Tayza who also holds timber concessions. He runs the Htoo group of companies, Air Bagan and Asia Wings, and Elite-Tech Co., Ayer Shwe Wah, Aureum Palace Hotels and Resorts, Htoo Trading, and Htoo Wood Products Ltd. Yangon development projects include seven hotels, apartment complexes, shop house redevelopments, and shopping malls. Tay Za had one of the earliest licenses to import fuel directly as part of the military government's moves to privatize the fuel industry and was a favourite of Than Shwe (head of state from 1992 to 2011 as Chair of the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC)).

**4 Ayeyarwady Bank**

Owned by the Max Group and one of Myanmar's youngest tycoons, Zaw Zaw. The Max Group was founded in the early 1990s and was an early car importer. It also owns a rubber plantation and has a history of dealings in timber and gems. It is also the local partner for Yangon's Novotel. The group had access to fuel and automobile imports during military rule. Max Zaw is linked to Maung Aye (Vice-Chair of the SPDC from 1993-2011) and to Than Shwe's grandson Nay Shwe Thway.

**5 Kanbawza Group and Niang Company**

Founded by U Aung Ko Win, also known as Saya Kyaung, originally a schoolteacher. The Kanbawza Group (KBZ) owns major businesses including airlines (Air KBZ, Myanmar Airways International) and the KBZ Bank and insurance companies (IKBZ). KBZ has major urban redevelopment projects in Yangon, including the right to restore and rebuild the Yangon Division Court. Under the Niang Co. It has invested in hotels and shopping malls. The company began with access to gems and Aung Ko Win reportedly had strong links with Maung Aye.

**6 Mayflower Bank**

Headed by U Kyaw Win, who also heads the state Directorate of Industry. The Mayflower Bank was temporarily closed in 2005 for money laundering but later reopened. Kyaw Win also owns and runs Yangon Airways and several resource companies registered in Singapore. He had close ties with General Maung Aye and there are media claims of links with opium trading in Shan State and with the Thai logging tycoon, Choon Tangkakarn. His Myanmar Mayflower Mining Enterprise Co has stakes in bamboo businesses and mining operations.

**7 Shwe Bank and SkyNet offices**

Owned by U Kyaw Win of the Shwe Thanwin group that runs Sky Net. Money from broadcasting was used to gain licenses from the Central Bank of Myanmar to launch the Shwe Rural and Urban Development Bank. Kyaw Win also has connections with former *Tatmadaw* Brigadier-General Kyaw Hsan, who became a minister in the SPDC governments and retained ministerial roles through the transition from direct military rule until 2016.

**8 Junction City malls and developments**

Developed by the Shwe Taung Group of Companies, headed by ethnic Kokang U Aik Htun and his son, Aung Zaw Naing. The group owns the Asia Wealth Bank and has invested in real estate and supermarkets, including the Wisaya Plaza, Myaing Haywin Housing, Kanthaya Plaza, Olympic Tower and Junction. It also has interests in coal mines and has ties with former General Khin Nyunt (who held the post of Chief of Intelligence prior to and during the SPDC period and was 9th Prime Minister of Myanmar from 25 August 2003 until 18 October 2004). Khin Nyunt fell from favour amongst other SPDC leaders and was subject to a period of house arrest.

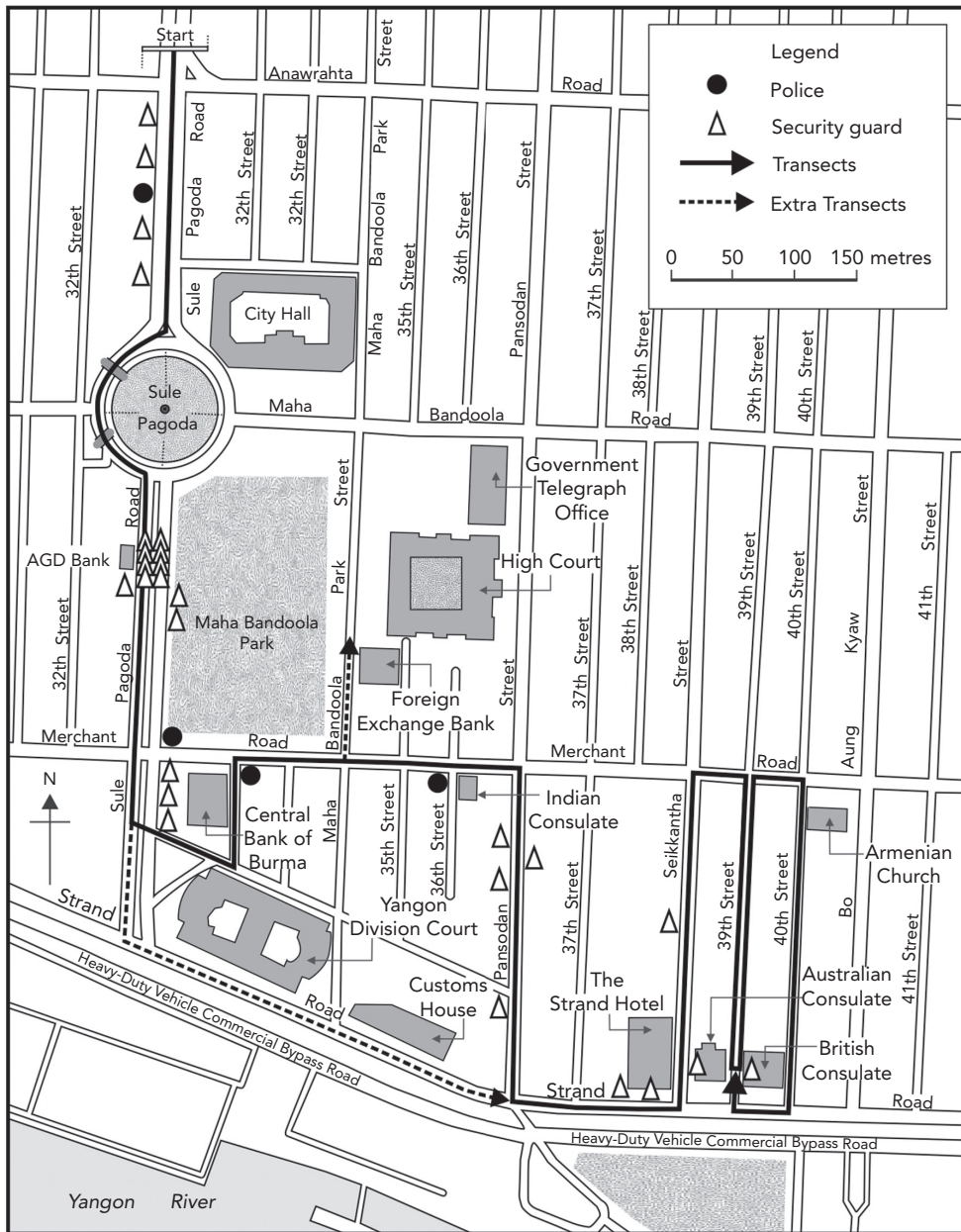
**9 Strand Hotel**

Now managed by GPC Hospitality. It was acquired by the G group, a partnership between Bernard Pe Win and Adrian Zecha of the Regent resorts group in the reform period. The G group has links with members of the NLD.

**10 Ruby Mart and Myawaddy Banks**

Ruby Mart was the first mall built in Myanmar and owned by the *Tatmadaw's* Union of Myanmar Economic Holdings Ltd (UMEHL). UMEHL owns the Myawaddy bank with offices in downtown Yangon and co-owns the Myanmar Brewery. A related military-owned enterprise, the Myanmar Economic Corporation (MEC) owns several businesses including the Inwa Bank and the Cybermec Information Technology Centre.

SOURCES: Based on sources in Yangon, plus Turnell (2009), Beech (2013), Montlake (2013), *Global Witness* (2015), Martov (2015), Htoon (2017)



**FIGURE 1** Transect routes

para-military and militias) who recycled peripheral frontier profits into the buildings and redevelopments encountered on the transects.

Other studies of Myanmar’s transitions have also drawn on walking as a mode of encounter in Yangon. Jayde Lin Roberts (2016: 4) account of *Mapping Chinese Rangoon: Place and Nation among the Sino-Burmese*, describes ‘Walking toward Understanding’, whereby she was compelled:

to walk the streets of Rangoon every day, to engage with the city and its people despite the heat and broken sidewalks, in order to be present for any possible



moment of unfolding ... I walked the streets as a fundamental practice in my research to pursue a more attuned and emplaced understanding that would be continually reshaped in order to approach local self-understanding.

By the time we began our fieldwork, the political transition was well underway. This transition was a protracted process, culminating in the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) forming a government in 2016, after elections in 2015, but in a system where the *Tatmadaw* was constitutionally guaranteed a quarter of parliamentary seats and control of three government ministries, including the Home Ministry. Within that Ministry, the General Administration Department (GAD) maintains a far-reaching system of local surveillance and governance that extends to many areas of social life, from landownership to taxation and population registration. In turn the GAD continues to work with the police and Bureau of Special Investigation. Describing their interaction and key roles, Saw and Arnold (2014: 12) note how they are:

all primarily focused on the security matters of the state. Within this group, the GAD officially places a very heavy ideational value on protecting peace and stability ... Down to the level of every village in the country, the GAD has a mandate to support government security efforts as well as report relevant information back

Issues of (in)security and networks of covert surveillance (as well as the more visible police and private security) still permeate Yangon, and have proliferated. One very tangible manifestation of their interactions occurred on 29 January 2017, when the prominent human and constitutional rights lawyer U Ko Ni was fatally shot by a Chinese-Burmese contract killer from Mandalay (reportedly hired by *Tatmadaw* officers), as he cradled his infant grandson in the taxi rank outside Yangon airport. A taxi driver was also killed. Since then, Myanmar featured in headlines around the world in the second half of 2017, when over 700,000 Rohingya fled from Rakhine state into Bangladesh in a context where the *Tatmadaw* and allied militias were accused of ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya Muslim minority. Rakhine's drama and a long-running series of ethnic-minority insurgencies and state counter-insurgencies in other parts of Myanmar all appear to have taken place far away from Yangon, with its fast urban redevelopment, burgeoning tourism and growing traffic congestion. Writing about that growth in Myanmar in mid-November 2017, *The Economist* (2017) noted that: 'Over the past decade the Burmese economy has boomed. Last year it grew by 5.9%. In the medium term, growth is expected to average 7% a year, according to the World Bank, making the country one of the peppiest in the region'. From a more critical vantage point, AbdouMaliq Simone (2018: 25) describes how:

With highly inflated land prices, substantial inward investment on the part of Chinese, Korean, Japanese and Singaporean developers, and the opening up of flows of all kinds across the region and globe in the light of Myanmar's political transformation, the city of some seven million inhabitants is set to replicate a conventional fabric ... of maximized ground rent, the servicing of the articulation of local elites with a growing multiplicity of external commercial actors ... [and] the peripheralization of poor and working class residents.

The simultaneity of the attacks on the Rohingya and high-speed development in Myanmar has yielded reflections on the relationships between these opposing pictures. Responding to an essay on the theme by Saskia Sassen (2017), better known for her work on global cities, Lee Jones (2017) stresses the complex and intersecting 'material and

ideological dynamics that explain the recurrent persecution of the Rohingya and anti-Muslim attacks more generally. He concludes that:

while simple pecuniary motives can never be entirely discounted, particularly in Myanmar's borderlands, the political economy underpinning the current Rohingya crisis is far more complicated than is suggested in articles making a few sloppy references to megaprojects and land grabs ... it reflects the crisis-ridden nature of the Burmese state since its inception (Jones, 2017).

Jones's argument is persuasive, echoed by other accounts of the ways in which a redemptive Buddhist and nativist (Bamar) narrative has long configured and continues to shape Myanmar's postcolonial politics (Aung-Thwin, 1985; Callahan, 2009; Foxeus, 2016; Wade, 2017). Yet modes of extractive development in Myanmar's many peripheries do impinge on the fabric of everyday life in Yangon in (infra)structural ways. The doyens of this frontier economy and market infrastructure, those who (in joint ventures with foreign investors) own the shopping malls, banks, hotels and real estate ventures are the very same tycoons, a 'narrow oligarchy' (Jones 2014: 144) known as the 'crony capitalists' of Myanmar, who flourished through decades of violent peripheral resource exploitation under direct military protection and what Kevin Woods terms 'ceasefire capitalism'. Woods (2011: 48) refers to them in the context of Myanmar's northern and western peripheries after years of conflict as a 'military-state constructed through the daily actions of a conglomeration of actors' [that] rests on '(trans)national businessmen and their access to global capitalist markets and finance capital (in this case Chinese)'. Such networks connect with (frequently illicit) commodity flows into south-west China, where they also become legible in cities (Qian and Tang, 2019). Myanmar's rulers, in particular the *Tatmadaw*, allocate resource concessions (for precious gems, timber, wildlife products and latterly natural gas among other commodities) and some of the attendant flows of capital (as well as illicit ones linked to narcotics and weapons) are being recycled into the redevelopment of Yangon's urban fabric, where they intersect with foreign capital through laws that require the latter to enter into joint ventures with local partners and brokers. As a code-word for these key intermediaries, the term 'crony' has entered everyday Burmese.

While the laws are now being modified to permit a larger foreign share, they date from the years of direct military rule, as the military leaders positioned themselves as the key brokers for the re-entry of foreign capital. These interactions are starkly visible in downtown Yangon and feature as a reoccurring theme in what follows. The next section of the article commences with a summary of Yangon's trajectory in the context of earlier flows of capital and labour as an imperial entrepôt and the postcolonial aftermath when it became subject to new logics of state power under successive military regimes. In turn, these have mutated into a landscape of development that is reworking the city into a renewed domain for the urbanization of capital, this time foregrounding tourism and burgeoning class privilege, enmeshed with the military (Selth, 2009; Prasse-Freeman and Win Latt, 2018). The attendant shifts as well as continuities and resemblances then loom large in our subsequent accounts of security, power and space in Yangon.

### **Rangoon/Yangon: imperial frontier to frontier market**

The scholarly literature on Yangon is relatively thin, notwithstanding a recent proliferation of policy briefs and NGO and aid agency reports. Roberts (2018: 65) notes how, 'in international media, Yangon is usually represented as a former colonial capital and its fading colonial monuments garner the most attention, usually identified as the key asset for renewing the city'. In particular, landmark colonial era buildings have been re-valored as a form of 'heritage', albeit one that Girke, (2015: 98) describes as 'subsumed and absorbed by the hegemony of the generic, market-oriented approach'.

The contemporary scale and modes of Yangon's transformation, historicized and connected with wider trajectories in Myanmar and examined here through a focus on the interactions of frontiers and security, offer a critical vantage point on these representations. In developing these arguments, we are encouraged by Roy's (2016: 207) call for critical urban scholarship to be 'attentive to historical difference as a fundamental and constitutive force in the making of global urbanization'.

The first Security Expo was described in marketing material as 'Your springboard to the emerging Myanmar security market' in 'Southeast Asia's Last Business Frontier' (Myanmar Security Expo, 2015). Similarly invoking frontiers, for the 'International Reputation Agency' Bell Pottinger, who have added a Yangon office to their branch network in London, Abu Dhabi, Bahrain, Dubai, Hong Kong, Kuala Lumpur and Singapore, Myanmar is poised to be 'the last great frontier market' in Asia (Stewart and Canning, 2015). And according to Mark Garnier (2017: 26), a Parliamentary Undersecretary at the UK's Department for International Trade, Myanmar was 'a new investment frontier'. In March 2019, it was announced that the Hong-Kong-headquartered Frontier Services Group, founded by former US military contractor Erik Prince (who also founded Blackwater, which operated—frequently under great controversy—in US-occupied Iraq) is 'moving into Myanmar to provide security services to Chinese and other foreign firms' (Chau, 2019). Online searches for 'Myanmar' and 'market' yield dozens of similarly bullish assessments from banks and accountancy firms, financial journalists and credit rating agencies. Their discourses of opening up, investment opportunity and routine invocation of frontiers are the latest incarnation of (originally World Bank) sponsored promotion of 'emerging' and 'frontier' markets as sites for speculative gains and investment prospects. In the 1990s, the International Finance Corporation, an arm of the World Bank, demarcated around 30 emerging markets, and investment fund managers soon offered emerging market stocks within garbs of objectivity and the art of portfolio picking. As Lai (2006: 627) recounts, within 'these agendas, knowledge structures, and strategic visualisation of global space' as emerging are tropes of progress, exoticism and discovery. Hence, these spaces were seen as ripe for fast profits amongst agents 'whose rhetoric of exploration-opportunity has closer affinities to classic colonial discourse ... characterized by frequent references to generalized geographical metaphors of frontiers, pioneers and exploration' (Sidaway and Pryke, 2000: 195). Frontier markets were originally identified by the IFC in the 1990s as a subset of the emerging markets. The frontier markets were then approximately a dozen countries with the newest or least capitalized stock markets. The exact list of frontier markets varies, with S&P Dow Jones for example, producing an array of indices for African, European (former communist countries) and Asian markets and the FTSE (co-owned by the *Financial Times* and London Stock Exchange) now list 29 countries as frontier markets. Examining the way that a 'next frontier' discourse is impacting in the case of Bangladesh, Gilbert (2019) calls for work that goes beyond analysing the perspectives of analysts and investors in International Financial Centres about frontier markets, to examine how the 'frontier' perspective circulates in the Bangladeshi capital of Dhaka. Although Myanmar's stock exchange only commenced trading in 2016 (decades after one was established in Dhaka), and it does not yet figure in the S&P or FTSE indices, the generic label of frontier market is also frequently applied to Myanmar, and its commercial capital of Yangon is portrayed as a splendid urban investment opportunity. This narrative circulates widely in Yangon itself and the private security industry, specifically low-paid male security guards and camera systems, is both represented as a key sector for such investment and forms the basis on which other sites of redevelopment are secured. It simultaneously constitutes a sector where money can be made and secures the wider (re)commoditization of the city within the historical lineage of colonial commodification, socialism and the subsequent transition culminating in frontier market discourses.



The colonial city of Rangoon was established after the British seizure of Lower Burma in 1852. A waterfront strand, docks and a grid of streets were established merging commerce, territory, power and (imperial) security from the outset. As Roberts (2016: 25) notes, 'Rangoon was explicitly designed as a capital city to serve the needs of the colonial state: to encourage trade and instigate order in a newly conquered territory'. The grid, extending back from the waterfront, 'rendered the city more readily ruled, more legible within British conceptions of order and manageability (*ibid.*: 26). The waterfront area was violently made anew:

gangs of labourers were organised to clear the enormous amount of debris, which was the result of the bombardment from the British warships. Along the river front, the huge teak posts which were used to form the outer stockade were pulled up and retrieved as valuable timber. Everything else was cleared, the only pagodas left standing were the Sule and the Botataung (Singer, 1995: 67-8).

A few kilometres inland from the strand, the Shwedagon pagoda (long a symbolic site in the cosmography of power and public dissent) was left intact, but included in a military cantonment. Spate and Trueblood (1942: 59) note that it was 'surrounded with a rampart and for some time was used partly as a military strong point'. Although the surrounding area became a European quarter, it was not laid out anew in the way that the 'inner town' had been, when Rangoon became one of the purest examples of those 'geopolitical, functional, political/economic, political, social/cultural, racial/ethnic, and physical/spatial' attributes that Anthony King (1990: 17) thinks characterize a colonial city. *Inter alia*, these include:

external origins and orientation ... multiplicity of functions, with presence of banks, agency houses, insurance companies, etc; acts as economic intermediary—symbolized by corrugated iron *godowns* (or warehouses) ... dualistic economy, dominated by non-indigenes ... parasitic relations with indigenous rural sector ... eventual formation of ingenuous bureaucratic-nationalist elite ... gridiron pattern of town planning combined with racial segregation (*ibid.*: 17-19).

From 1886, Burma was integrated into the British Raj-state. As Bayly (2003) documents, after 60 years of colonial rule, 9% of the population of Rangoon were Chinese and 56% were Indian. Imperial security rested on troops from India, even after Burma was separated from the Indian Empire in 1937. December 1941 saw air raids by Japanese bombers, and by March 1942 British-led forces had abandoned Rangoon. Although there was great loss of life and material and the docks and oil terminals were destroyed, the urban fabric of the core remained largely intact. So when—three years after the British returned—Burma became a sovereign state in 1948, the post-colony inherited a city that owed its origins and structure to a colonial polity. Faced with multiple insurgencies in the peripheries of the country, the *Tatmadaw* came to take centre stage. A coup d'état in March 1962 led by General Ne Win established an enduring military dominance, albeit the formal government was subsequently drawn from the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) in a one-party system. From 1962 the regime extended a policy of statism, '*Burmanization*' and autarky, in which major firms and land were nationalized. Notwithstanding the restoration of democratic politics in the last decade, the *Tatmadaw* remains central to power in contemporary Myanmar.

Student-led protests in Rangoon in 1988 were violently crushed by the *Tatmadaw* (resulting in up to 3,000 civilian deaths). The *Tatmadaw* then established a State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), and ruled directly in place of the BSPP. After

the 1988 coup and under the auspices of the SLORC, renamed the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) in 1997, Yangon was subject to an Urban Works Programme that reinforced regime security. Footbridges were placed over strategic highways (notably Sule Pagoda Road) and dividing fences were erected down their centres to enable better policing of demonstrations. This physical securitization was put in place in tandem with a wave of evictions from downtown Yangon (Seekins, 2005; Rhoads, 2018). Though this was, in the first instance, linked to regime security, it also paved the way for what is an ongoing gentrification of the area, in which commercial interests and the interface between Burmese and foreign capital became increasingly legible. The process was initially piecemeal, but accelerated with the political opening in Myanmar since around 2010. Elections took place in 2015 and the protracted political transition saw the easing of western sanctions (that had been put in place after the 1988 coup). However, as indicated in the previous section, the *Tatmadaw* remain deeply entrenched in a nexus of political and economic power that has been decades in the making. Attending Myanmar's first security Expo in late September and early October 2015 (and our return to a follow-up Expo in 2018) offered a mode of encounter with this nexus. The next section draws on these encounters as a lens to understand Yangon's development. Moving to downtown Yangon, the subsequent longer section drawing on our street-level encounters and narrated via the transects and the conclusions return to the ways that sites once central to imperial frontier-making again feature in frontier narratives and what critical lessons this carries. The two sections—derived from interactions at the Expos and from the grounded transects in downtown Yangon—represent different entry points examining interactions of security, frontiers and the urban. However, they overlap and recurrently inform each other. We encountered many of the same firms and agencies in the streets and at the Expo. The transects though form a longer section of the article and enable us to narrate and analyse wider reconfigurations of central Yangon.

### Exhibiting security

Registering as university researchers with an interest in security, we were made welcome at the first Security Expo, whilst a range of national and international security companies proffered free gifts (like USBs and toy drones) to domestic buyers, made up primarily of uniform-clad Myanmar police (*Myanmar Ye*) and *Tatmadaw* officials accompanied by other business and government officials. At the exhibition hall beyond the edge of downtown Yangon it quickly became clear that most exhibitors (some of whom later complained that there were not enough visitors to the Expo, in a market that was 'not yet ready') were willing to talk to us, sharing their experiences and information about the security industry in Myanmar. Indeed, when we returned to the third Expo in October 2018, it had been significantly scaled back, with only about 30 exhibitors. However, in 2015, one of us (Jasnea) was able to join business meetings meant only for a few select western and Singaporean partners chosen to work particularly with Burmese opposite numbers with close connections to the *Tatmadaw* or who were ex-*Tatmadaw* themselves. The opportunities offered by Myanmar, as the 'last market frontier in Asia' became a shared discourse among attendees of the Expo. It was possible for Jasnea to speak at length in Mandarin, English and some Burmese with the Chinese businesses and the local Burmese distributors. These interactions focused on the market for private security, the nexus of business/military and state and their dynamics in Yangon.

In a dynamic business field where companies are renamed and merge, it is difficult to definitively determine the exact number of security providers operating in the city today (O'Toole, 2015), but the expo brochure listed around 150 operational private security firms. We found only five 'verified' security companies that work nationally and about 58 others listed as operating only in Yangon in the Myanmar directory. Of these, one company was the most prominent. It dealt with all-round security services, from locally recruited and foreign (Gurkha) guards to biometrics,

CCTV and training. However, the signs of direct military partnerships were conspicuous. The ‘Leader of Ceremonies’ was the daughter of an ex-*Tatmadaw* general, who was the current director of her father’s private security company. The local co-organizer was the son of a *Tatmadaw*-linked minister. Amongst the buyers, the major representation was from the police and the Ministry of Home Affairs. Senior delegates from these agencies gave speeches and after a few formal words and photographs, they quickly left, leaving behind non-uniformed officers and representatives to gather information and network. Bankers and delegates from the airport and railways attended too. Delving into the intricacies of the Expo, we observed a complex mix of international partners from Interpol to small East and South East Asian firms, led by Singaporean and Chinese companies who all entered with hopes and narratives of capturing market share. The dominant narrative among both the buyers and sellers was that Myanmar had an ‘urgent need’ for security technologies. Throughout, we heard reiterations of: ‘Myanmar is a niche market in security, enter now or suffer later’.

There were three main categories of sellers. First, the Western firms, largely run by ex-military (amongst our interviewees were firms run by former British and Canadian military) offering all-inclusive packages of guards, training and urban market intelligence to businesses themselves led by Myanmar ex-military. They navigate the market with relative ease and poise, resting on their connections. Second, there are firms from China and Singapore, who have won over some government-connected distributors and suppliers. They have been able to tap into pre-existing Burmese-Chinese networks. Myanmar’s deepening relationship with China becomes evident here and many of the Burmese distributors expressed trust in dealing with the Chinese. One of the organizers told us that:

it was through the Myanmar Industries Association [run by a well-connected figure] here, whom we met in Interpol world that we could even enter this market. Without them, it’s impossible to even talk to the government, let alone bid in the openings. We are very glad this consultancy firm knows high officials. We don’t want to know how they know; we just want to do business.

The CEO of one such successful firm that dealt in frontier defence technologies and biometric surveillance explained:

Our company does not do small retail business. We have big partners, so when the government calls for the tender, then we have to go place the tender. Most of our products are with the military. If you have connection with government means you automatically get it. Everyone else? Just forget it! Or you pay more to the government somehow. Many times, I have seen the minister’s/military general’s sons or daughters owning a company, then you cannot even raise the tender with them, then why try?

The third category of sellers are other businesses looking for local distributors and partners. Those we spoke to amongst these security providers were encountering deadlocks. They were frustrated once they realized the difficulty of entering the market without establishing previous business relations with the government. One of these providers told us:

The problem is, only if you have connections with ministers and powerful people in the central government, can you get government projects. So, even if your price and products are better, still you cannot win with government. There are a lot of problems. Also local firms are very competitive, not at all friendly. They want to be the boss.

That the ex-military firms were able to establish relations on the ground became clear when Jasnea was able to attend closed-door meetings between the Union of Myanmar Security Industries and their Singaporean counterparts. Seated around a grand teak meeting table laden with food and wine in the colonial-era Kandawgi Palace Hotel in Yangon, each of the attendees (mostly security company representatives and consultants) was generously gifted with precious Burmese gems. Such connections as were evident parallel those that Woods (2009) had mentioned previously in ‘Ceasefire Capitalism’ where he describes the links between the *Tatmadaw*, Chinese financing-and-crony businesses:

After the government gained control of provincial business centres in the north (e.g. Myitkyina in Kachin State and Lashio in northern Shan State), resource extraction trading networks became connected to the regime’s wider patron-client relations that stretch from Yangon to Beijing and beyond (*ibid.*: 752).

In these meetings, we had an opportunity to interact with the top players in the security industry. While more than 60 firms participated, only ten local firms and a handful of representatives of the first kind of foreign partnership industries were able to take part in these deal-making negotiations.

The Expo revealed the rush to supply security infrastructures. This became clear from several of our interviews with the providers, who spoke about transforming cities into security markets, pointing out the growth potential accompanying what one seller called ‘insecure governments’. Additionally, private intelligence firm representatives talked about how it was relatively easier to convince a government that remains wary of public protests and faces frontier insurgencies. Some sellers proclaimed that it was their job to ‘crack open’ the Myanmar market as a strategy as long as they made connections with the right contacts. Amongst these, the Singaporean security providers were particularly forceful, as one explains:

Security markets and companies in Singapore have now been forced to come out because, in terms of software technology, Singapore is buying from the West, while the hardware is from China. The competition is too high for security producers in Singapore to maintain their competitive advantage in price and as well as high-end tech .... So, we have to create a market in the rest of developing South East Asia even, for example, in Myanmar, where the demand still does not exist.

Other privately owned intelligence and security firms saw opportunities in the light of political realities. Their worldview is captured in the words of one seller:

Look at the war, now oil and gas companies, even international NGOs and the UN need protection all the time. They need security systems. So this market in particular has a lot to gain from Myanmar further opening up. That is why we have been successful in selling to airports, hospitals and borders. Now you see Rohingya and other problems with all the refugee crisis and people moving from camp to camp—we can go in and say we will secure the camps to the government. It’s all business.

These infrastructures, many of the officials interviewed thought, would usher in new kinds of capitalizations and quicker business-to-business links into a resource-rich economy. In Yangon, as we shared some cups of tea with staff from one of the private security firms, they explained that:

The government has a big plan to build the public space surveillance network, but the tenders have not been invited yet ... The government will invite private security companies in the three cities—Mandalay, Yangon and Naypidaw. The government want to know what is happening where. The Ministry of Home Affairs is involved.

During subsequent visits to Yangon in November 2017 and October 2018, we spent a few hours each afternoon at the flagship Shangri-La (the former Traders Hotel), in its twenty-first floor Horizon Club Lounge. Similar to our earlier encounters in the Expo, on the twenty-first floor, we were surrounded by foreign business-folk and their local counterparts striking deals. Around us were conversations about downtown real estate, beef farms on the Chinese border and at one point about the supply of cabling for a CCTV system. In Yangon, the redevelopment of the downtown area creates a demand for private security guards around hotels, new offices and construction sites. Seeking a more grounded, mobile and public encounter with security and space in the centre of Yangon, the next section of the article steps out of the Expo, starting at the security checkpoint at the Shangri-La's front entrance in downtown Yangon. The transect routes were planned to connect key symbolic sites of power and redevelopment: the city centre as a frontier for capital, partly comprised of money derived from licit and illicit (but all state/military-linked) business in Myanmar's resource frontiers and partly derived from a range of joint-venture deals with foreign investors.

### **Transecting downtown Yangon**

Our street-level encounters with security in downtown Yangon all began at what was formerly the Traders Hotel (now rebranded as the Shangri-La). It comprises a 22-storey tower at a strategic location overlooking the old downtown street of the Sule Pagoda. Traders suffered a bombing in October 2013 that injured an American tourist. The police blamed insurgents from the Karen National Union (KNU), one of the movements that had sought to carve out autonomy in up-country Myanmar in a long struggle against the *Tatmadaw*. The KNU denied the charges, pointing out that they had signed a ceasefire in 2012. Burma has a long history of political assassinations through bombings, which continued into the 1980s and 1990s; 'and all Burmese can recite the death of the entire pre-Independence cabinet of General Aung San when a grenade was thrown into a session of parliament' as Skidmore (2004: 21) notes. But the 2013 Traders Hotel bombing had targeted what Skidmore (*ibid.*: 93) also terms the developing; 'narcoarchitecture'. She notes that, traditionally, no building in downtown Yangon had been taller than the Sule Pagoda. But that changed by the 1990s, with:

a collection of 'joint enterprise' concrete skyscrapers and other buildings .... Hotels such as Traders and Shangri La Hotels, for which Lo Hsing-han contributed capital and laundered heroin profits ... This narcoarchitecture comprises a collection of grotesque parodies ... hastily constructed, employing hundreds of construction workers in place of automation, and are often made of flimsy materials.

Since she wrote, capital has moved into the more substantial colonial area buildings and their environs—some key ones lie ahead on the transect. But for now we watch the X-ray bag screenings and all visitors to the hotel walking through rectangular metal detectors of the type more often seen at airports. Traders had turned out to be, along with hotels in more geopolitically conflicted cities, a 'soft target' (Fregonese and Ramadan, 2015). Built in 1996 as a joint venture between the Lo Hsing Han family's Asia world group of companies (linked to the opium trade and *Tatmadaw* leaders, see Table 1, building 1) and the Kuok investment group, the hotel is located next to the new



Sule Mall (which was being completed at the time of our first transect), on what was once the Armenian cemetery, as well as a site of pro-democracy protest in 2007. It was here that the Japanese photojournalist Kenji Nagai was killed by a *Tatmadaw* soldier as he tried to document the group of protestors clashing with the military. Now, a decade on, completely transformed from a protest and public assembly space, both the concrete mall and all the hotel entrances have those airport-style security scanners and the Eagle Security Company patrols the perimeter.

As we leave the hotel and mall to walk down Sule Pagoda Road to begin the transects, we pass under the pedestrian bridges built during the early 1990s to aid surveillance after the 1988 uprising. When we returned to this area in October 2018, one of the bridges bore a poster advertising the third Security Expo (Figure 2). We pause in front of the multi-storey AGD Bank (see Table 1, building 3), one of the biggest banking ventures in Myanmar, formed by U Tay Za, another controversial business tycoon (and former military arms dealer) who heads the Htoo Group that also owned the colonial-era Kandawgyi Hotel, where we had joined some closed-door meetings during the 2015 Expo. The hotel later burnt down in an accidental fire (killing two tourists in October 2017) worsened by the combustible teak that it was built with. A grandson of the former military head of state Ne Win is also a major shareholder in the AGD bank, which at the time of our initial transect had plans to be further capitalized on the newly opened stock exchange (that we will pass in a moment) housed in the former Central Bank of Burma building. In front of the bank was the largest single concentration of private security guards seen during any of the transects, with ten guards in bank uniforms, armed with truncheons.



**FIGURE 2** A bridge over Sule Pagoda Road, bearing an advertisement for the third Myanmar Security Expo (photo by James D. Sidaway, October 2018)

The new and old bank (now stock exchange), the existing high-end hotels and new ones being prepared in the former colonial-era Customs House and Division Court that we pass later are all indicative of the connections between the extractive system put in place under the military, redevelopment and foreign capital. What is more immediately visible is the relationship between these buildings and the security guards around them. The guards have uniforms, but no weapons and many wear sandals rather than boots. These very low-waged men have little to do for hours on end, and on a return visit to the site one of us was able to chat with them about the tedium of their long hours. Their presence signifies the importance of the sites and ensures access to them is only for visibly middle-class people or elites. While most of the time the security guards have nothing to do, one evening in November 2017, we watched guests for a high society Burmese wedding party arrive at the Sule mall, with the guards taking up position around a gift-table and airport-style scanner at the mall entrance. Guests stepped from SUVs right next to the entrance, in their polished silk wedding costumes, amidst bemused-looking tourists leaving the mall and nearby hotel who immediately encountered lines of SUVs and high-end cars, exhaust fumes and throngs of bejewelled guests.

However, on our first and all subsequent transects, we walked on to and around the new stock exchange, a semi-neoclassical vault-like building, with few windows. The building has served as a financial node before—first as the colonial Reserve Bank of India (established here in 1937, two years after the main branch was built in Delhi). As Japanese forces approached in 1942, much of the valuable contents inside the bank were moved to Calcutta or northwards with retreating British imperial forces. However, after they took the city, the Japanese dynamited the bank's vaults (Bansel, Fox and Oka, 2015). With Burma's independence, it became the Union (later Central) Bank of Burma, though still under British control into the 1950s. When the Central Bank was relocated in the 1990s, the building became the private Myawaddy Bank (1993) and by the time of our first transects in March 2016, it had been renovated to serve as the Yangon Stock Exchange, with co-financing from the Japanese investment bank Daiwa Securities and the Japan Exchange Group (owner of the Tokyo and Osaka Stock Exchanges); although, as Rhoden (2016: 204) notes, 'the actual decision-making mechanics and main powerbrokers in all this are unclear'. The exchange commenced trading the very same week we first walked the transect in March 2016 and now lists five firms. When we first arrived on a weekday evening, three security guards sat at the top of its steep entrance steps. Returning on subsequent transects, more security guards have been added, but the land in front of the building variously serves as a parking lot for buses and/or a space where young men skateboard. There is steel fencing around the bank and some very old improvised razor wire barricades, but each time we walk around the rear, the adjacent colonial-era buildings are crumbling and inhabited by relatively poor residents and the pavements in between are full of street food-stalls, evening time impromptu soccer games and dangerous open drains. On the first evening transect, however, in March 2016, a couple were posing for wedding photographs in front of the building, watched by the three security guards, friends and family and us (Figure 3). The image and superficial grandeur of the building signified an aura of money, power and success.

Our transect continues into Merchant street, past a few private security guards and a police station with half a dozen police-trucks parked outside and a handful of police cleaning the frontage. We then reach the Indian Consulate, which has a police station next to it in a prefabricated building. Nevertheless, like those waiting for visas, we are able to walk right up to the doors. On one of the 2016 transects, we chatted briefly to a security guard administering a shoulder rub to his colleague. Returning to talk to them on the subsequent transects, we realized that the security company here had changed and we were informed that a previous guard had gone back to driving taxis. On



**FIGURE 3** A wedding photograph posed outside the neoclassical facade of the Yangon Stock Exchange (originally Reserve Bank of India, 1937) (photo by James D. Sidaway, March 2016)

reaching this point on those subsequent transects, we warn each other to keep our eyes on the pavement. The consulate and the gentrifying sites and commercial interests along the transect are surrounded by cameras and private security agencies, but the elite rarely walk and pedestrians have to negotiate damaged pavements, risky constructions and speeding cars. When we pass construction sites, there are often cement bags suspended above us, sometimes near to where men, women and children rest or work as street vendors under umbrellas or in traditional tea house sheds. Repeatedly we have to be very careful and move slowly, looking up when near to building sites then looking down at where we put our feet, for in many places pedestrians also risk stumbling into open-access tunnels and drains.

Turning right into Pansodan Street, we pass the newest entry in the banking sector—the massive Shwe Bank (see Table 1, building 7) across the road, which opened just under two months before our first transects. Although there were relatively few security guards here on our first transect, we see more on our return visits. The bank was founded and is owned by the Shwe Thanglin group, which had been rewarded with some of the major reconstruction contracts under the military government after cyclone Nargis hit Myanmar in 2008. Its founder is also another

crony known to enjoy close business relationships with the *Tatmadaw*. We arrive at the exclusive 31-room Strand hotel (see Table 1, building 9)—a structure with a long colonial pedigree facing what used to be the lively colonial port along the docks, now hidden by fences and land reclamation schemes. The port was recapitalized in late 1990s after a long period of decline following its nationalization in the 1960s. The Strand itself was refurbished in 1993 through a joint venture between *Tatmadaw*-linked businessmen and Aman (signifying peace/security in Sanskrit and a range of modern languages) Resorts, an Indonesian business headed by Adrian Zecha from an elite colonial-era family in the Netherlands East Indies who, after returning to Indonesia from exile in Singapore and the West during the Surkarno era, married into Indonesian Chinese business interests and established a multinational hotel, publishing and hospitality business. Seekins (2011: 174) notes that a night at the Strand does not come cheap and:

can set one back US\$400 while other colonial reconstructions, such as the Savoy and Pansea hotels, are only slightly less pricey. Such places are beautifully decorated, tranquil oases from the dust, clutter and crowds outside with their abundant air conditioning ... they provide the modern tourist with a luxury the British colonials never enjoyed, unless they went off to the hills: freedom from the climate. As much as walls or security guards, air conditioning creates a world apart.

When we first pass the Strand, there is a UN Population Fund car and driver outside and a few limos. With the Australian Consulate and British Embassy nearby, there is a concentration of physical security barriers here. Although fairly nominal in comparison to the barricades around similar sites in more conflicted cities, they do limit pedestrian and vehicular access. Though we can pass through one where a gate is open, on nodding at the security guard, we have to backtrack at another which leads us to route around the Armenian Church, and the old godowns in between, a few used by light industries such as water bottling, but mostly packed with low-income families. But we end our first transect drinking tea and becoming the subjects of conversation and scrutiny outside the Bureau of Special Investigation in Seikkantha Street. We ourselves become wary of being watched by non-uniformed personnel, quietly sipping tea, eyes following our moves. Such low-tech modes of surveillance had been pervasive in Myanmar through the long years of military rule. For Yangon they were accompanied by barricades, soldiers and state-directed community organizations and spectacles. Skidmore (2004: 7) described both the pervasiveness of regime-enforced order and the ‘layers or veneers of conformity that Burmese people present to each other and, most especially, to the military regime’ and how:

The *Tatmadaw* maintains a continual visible presence on the streets of Burma’s cities. Hiding behind barricades and bushes, or peering out of public buildings and construction sites, Burma’s army appears to be on the watch ... and always listening ... [C]ontinual military inhabitation [means that] ... in the present political geography, the bodies of soldiers move through spaces no longer available to civilians and the bodies of civilians are routed into configurations demarcated by violence, both real and symbolic.

These modes of state surveillance endure, but their role is now far less central than during the decades of direct military rule. In Yangon they are now supplemented by security guards and CCTV around selected buildings. The shifting relationship between these different forms of security in Myanmar raises thorny questions. To what end is the Burmese state itself surveying the private security industry or conversely how





**FIGURE 4** An advertisement for a CCTV installation course. The Burmese wording reads ‘Apply for special short course and directly enter job market, course duration 10 days, teaches CCTV installation in office, home, shop security and other things linked with CCTV (photo by Jasnea Sarma, July 2017)

far are the private guards employed to protect the interests of capital and the new elites themselves becoming a form of state apparatus, providing surveillance for the reconfigured regime in Myanmar?<sup>3</sup> There are no simple answers to these questions. What is very clear on downtown Yangon’s streets, however, is that the presence of private security has proliferated. During the transects, we observed posters (Figure 4), incongruously bearing a cropped image of a white man, advertising courses in security camera installation. Meanwhile, the Yangon press reports that over 400,000 people have no affidavits of land ownership (Thu, 2016). They can therefore be expelled when land

3 We thank an IJURR referee for this formulation.



or buildings are redeveloped. This applies to many in these downtown areas we transect. As the city here is being remade, a mode of gentrification secures it for business, tourism and consumption on the part of a reconstituted and increasingly confident elite.

Mindful of multiplying modes and forms of security, we venture into the Strand, before passing the former colonial-era Customs House and Division Court, the latter now fenced off and in the latter stages of redevelopment into another luxury hotel and high-end shops. Writing of the Strand and its environs, Maurizio Peleggi (2005: 258) noted that:

What gives the Strand edge over other enhanced colonial hotels is the authenticity of its surroundings: downtown Yangon, featuring the largest concentration of late Victorian and Edwardian architecture in the world ... virtually unchanged since the end of colonial rule. Within a few blocks on either side of The Strand are the General Post Office, High Court, City Hall and the Law Court buildings, as well as several government and commercial offices ... part of a living, and at times crumbling urban environment where the city's inhabitants (and not foreign tourists) take centre stage.

On return visits to this area in 2017 and 2018, we encounter more security guards nearby. But along the way, all the old densely occupied buildings are without security guards—many of them are slated for clearance/redevelopment, producing the kinds of displacements of the inhabitants that Peleggi encountered here a decade before. This ongoing displacement has since been documented by other critical observers (notably, Henderson and Webster, 2015; Simone, 2018). We return to this process in our conclusions.

### **Conclusions: intersecting frontiers**

Writing about pre-Second World War Rangoon, Donald Seekins (2011: 11) notes how:

Colonial Rangoon was a product of 'continuous creation through violent means' in which old social patterns and landscapes were uprooted and replaced with new ones that suited the purposes of the British Indian regime: law and order, defense of the empire, profits ... multi-ethnic Rangoon, a majority of whose people were Indians before World War II, was as much a display of the power (and violence) of the colonial state as the massive buildings erected in the Central Business District.

Likewise, Christopher Bayly (2003: 5) describes how: 'The British built a new monumental Rangoon between 1880 and 1930 ... As the Great Depression gathered force, European control over the Burmese and Indian labour force became harsher'. Rangoon would experience further violence in the years that followed. Firstly, Japanese occupation, then the immediate turmoil of the post-colonial epoch, succeeded by coups, popular mobilization and military responses. With the political and economic transition of recent years that has been our focus in this article, security in Yangon has come to mean securing the conditions for accumulation and profit and sites of elite consumption. This leads to the proliferation of private security guards and surveillance systems. But it extends to the expulsion of those poorer residents who now get in the way of downtown Yangon's glitzy gentrification, belying promises of development for all (Prasse-Freeman and Win Latt, 2018). This combination of (in)securities is as integral to the processes of reconstruction in Yangon as the 'concrete, sand, heavy construction equipment, and hard-hatted labourers' that Elinoff *et al.* (2017: 580) claim has become part of an urban 'structure of feeling' whereby 'From Singapore to Mumbai, and Phnom Penh to Beijing,

intensive construction is not only reshaping city environments, but also redefining their economies, politics, and social lives' (*ibid.*). For Yangon too, the attendant forms of socio-spatial transformation echo those found in some other 'post-socialist' post-colonies, yielding new opportunities for profit and fast development, where, capital, state and security intermesh. Writing of these in Phnom Penh, Nam (2017: 647) describes a 'highly splintered and uneven cityscape' that is authorized by the state and 'produced by a motley group of [foreign and Khmer] actors stoked by exuberance over property values and expectations of growth'. Arguably what is especially evident in Yangon's case are the ways that the downtown colonial-built environment provides a domain and organizational template for business, exclusion and power where 'development' is now enacted.

The points of departure in this article—around the interactions of different types of frontiers and security—and the range of investors drawn into these processes are embodiments of what one student of Neil Smith's work, calls a 'Speculative Planet', in which 'new geographies of structural violence' (Slater, 2017) are at work. In Yangon, such contemporary structural violence also rests on combinations of resource frontiers and multidirectional capital flows, as well as imperial violence and its ongoing postcolonial aftermaths. As has been noted elsewhere 'to the extent power, ecologies and people intersect in new configurations of "planetary urbanisation" (Brenner and Schmid, 2012) they do so on imperial ground' (Sidaway *et al.*, 2014b: 16).

This article has signalled how frontier narratives are folded into the mix. Frontiers are, according to Tsing (2005: 31), 'a travelling theory, a foreign form requiring translation'. She notes how, drawing on an Indonesian case study, frontier narrative arrived there 'with many layers of previous associations' (*ibid.*). No less so in Myanmar. Both cases point to the intimate relationships between cities, imperialism and what (after Haines, 2012) we might call 'frontierization', or what Beverley (2013) calls 'frontier as resource'. Critical engagement with the thesis on planetary urbanization has argued that its 'search for extended operational landscapes of the urban out there in "remote", "wilderness" areas fails to notice the internalization of extended operational landscapes within cities of the global South' (Reddy, 2018: 530). Arguably, it is the intersections that demand closest scrutiny, as a range of, in the words of a recent examination of 'frontier assemblages' in Asia, 'relationship[s] between margins and centres that ... have grave and eminently tangible implications' (Cons and Eilenberg, 2019: 7). This rewards grounded and embodied work, simultaneously attendant to and mindful of what is at stake in historicizing macro-scale processes. Though an account from a peripheral city that has hitherto largely been off the map in urban studies, our article has investigated such intersections through Yangon, theorizing the particular histories and presents of its downtown via the interactions of frontiers and their securitization. Our case study signals further critical potential for investigating how cities are reconfigured through multiple frontiers.

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