

# **“IMPORTANCE OF LANDMARKS AND SYMBOLS IN BUILT ENVIRONMENT: IDENTIFICATION APPROACH IN MYANMAR”**

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## **Abstract**

Landmarks and symbols are important in built environment to know the identity of the nation. If Eiffle tower is seen, it is known as France, Petronas twin tower as Malaysia and Great wall as China. That is because they are Landmarks and symbols of their countries. Likewise, Shwedagon is the most important landmark and symbol of Yangon, Myanmar. For this reason, landmarks and symbols are objects on land that serve as guides and regarded as representing or standing for their nations. Landmarks and symbols are important property for a beautiful city, they can give people pleasure to see them and special importance when considering environment at the urban scale. From an architectural aspect, landmarks and symbols are approached especially with visual qualities and visual perception. In Myanmar, there are seven states and seven divisions. In Shan state, Shwe Umin (Golden Tunnel of Pintaya) is famous as a landmark of its state, the Royal Palace with battlemented walls and the moat surrounding it are the landmarks and symbols of Mandalay division and Kyaikhtyio pagoda is the landmark and symbol of Mon state, etc. Because of their landmarks and symbols, their cities become famous and beautiful. Landmarks themselves are a place to communicate the people and the region. In this paper, list of representative landmarks and symbols of each region in Myanmar is shown and significant landmarks of Yangon, Shwedagon pagoda is chosen by visual identification approach. The review of historical background of Shwedagon, landmark and symbol itself, location wise, the syntax of its location within the urban context, in the past and today are expressed. It was analyzed visually on various levels, within the premises of it within a wider urban fabric. Then its location within their wider urban fabric was expressed. Finally the clear description of the landmark and symbol, visual character and role within the urban fabric has come out. The design criteria for landmarks and symbols for the future in Myanmar will be expressed. The future work of this paper is to restore back its urban role and how to integrate that with the current regulations and urban development plan for the area of Shwedagon pagoda and its environs.

**Keywords:** Landmarks and symbols, Visual identification, Yangon, Shwedagon pagoda

## **1. Introduction**

Myanmar stands out proudly for her own culture and traditions since time immemorial. Landmarks and symbols indicate show our proud culture, traditions and other valuable things. Most of the landmarks and symbols in Myanmar are pagodas. Landmarks and symbols are object on land that serve as guides and regarded as representing or standing for their nations. Landmarks are special importance when giving directions to other people since they are so easily recognizable. It is difficult to conceive of the region without having this great edifice come to mind. They can give people pleasure to see them and special importance when considering environment at the urban scale. It is necessary to conserve these landmarks and symbols as the historical heritages. To conserve and create a beautiful environment, it is necessary to provide specific guidelines for landmarks and symbols in urban design which are controlled from the visual aspect. In this way, the better urban aesthetics and method of conserving the historic landmarks can be provided. Myanmar has seven states and seven divisions, states are Kachin, Kayah, Kayin, Chin, Mon, Rakhaine and Shan. Divisions are Sagaing, Bago, Magway, Mandalay, Yangon, Ayarwaddy and Tainingthari. According to the

criteria; architectural value, historical value, renowned recognized by the community, representative landmarks and symbols are Taungwe pagoda in Kayah state, Zweekabin Hill pagoda in Kayin state, Kyaikhtiyo pagoda in Mon state, Shitthaung pagoda and in Rakhaine state, Hpaungdawoo pagoda and Gotehtake bridge in Shan state, Sagaing hill pagodas and Kaunghmudaw pagoda in Sagaing division, Mandalay Royal Palace, the City Wall and the Moat, the Bagan's pagodas and Popa hill Pagoda in Mandalay division. Shwemawdaw Pagoda and Kanbawzathadi palace in Bago division, Shwedagon pagoda City Hall and Sule pagoda in Yangon division, Mawtinsun pagoda in Magway division. They have their historical value respectively. They can represent their respective regions.

In Myanmar, there is no urban spaces like that of the foreign countries. Market place and space in religious buildings are the traditional meeting place of the people. Such places can be called urban spaces because there is no strict limitations to become an urban space. Because the majority of the Myanmar people are the Buddhists, the place on the pagodas are ever crowded.

Alongside the history, the Myanmar had built many pagodas on the summit of hills and mountains. At that, the immense mountains were more dominant than any architectural feature man could provide. Thus, the form of pagodas repeated this theme. They were placed on the summit and hillsides to emphasize nature and their importance. They realized that mountains are the most magnificent and have a visually overwhelming character on their immediate vicinity. Thus, natural form is emphasized by complementary urban forms. Pagodas on the hill are harmony to, and emphasis of nature.

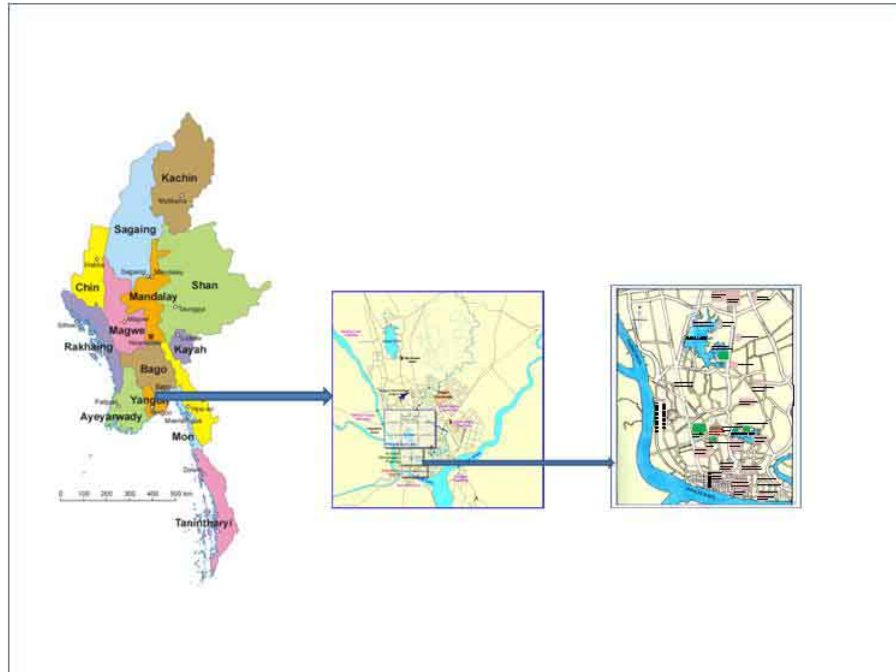
The aim of this paper is to identify the importance and significance of a landmark and symbol, Shwedagon pagoda in the urban fabric of Yangon and to study the visual needs in future town-planning and urban design process.



*Figure 1. Pagodas on Sagaing Hil*

### **1.1. Why yangon is chosen for this study**

It is the main gateway to Myanmar and has been developed along with the changing aspect of socio-economic developments. Newly built commercial buildings and residential apartments have been developed in almost every part of the city. Yangon is famous and significant town in the history of Myanmar. It possesses several of historical heritage and monuments, from the past.



*Figure 2. Myanmar Map, Yangon Map, Shwedagon Pagoda and its environment*

Dr Su Su stated in her paper that there are one hundred and eighty nine listed buildings for its historical value. Most of them are located in downtown area. Famous buildings are city hall, Sule pagoda, custom house, Botahtaung pagoda and etc.

### **1.2. Why shwedagon pagoda is chosen for this study**

According to the criteria for the most significant landmark, no one can deny that the most significant landmark and symbol of Yangon is the Shwedagon pagoda. The earlier account of Yangon is always associated with the Shwedagon pagoda. Shwedagon pagoda is the landmark visible from miles around towering above the green cityscape of Yangon. It is cultural lighthouse of Myanmar and one of the wonders of the world. It is attractive for its architecture

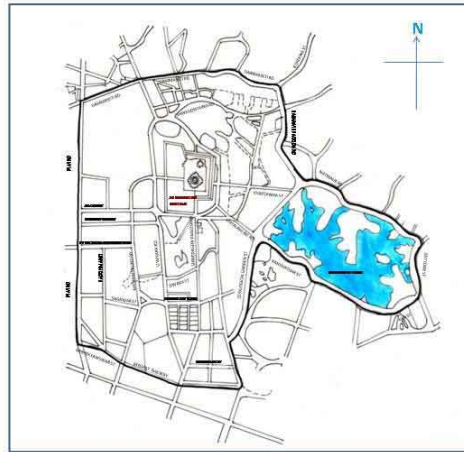


*Figure 3. The Shwedagon pagoda*

### **1.3 Importance of shwedagon pagoda in built environment of yangon**

Because of the values of Shwedagon pagoda in urban design of Yangon Shwedagon's environs already had been restricted by the existing

by laws and regulations (Y.C.D.C, 1996) such as the building which has over six stories are not allowed to build in the following restricted area to conserve the value of Shwedagon pagoda and the guidelines for Shwedagon Pagoda zone are presented in “The visual aspects of urban design in Yangon” by Ma Nandar Linn, November 2003. These recommendations are based on the criteria, 1.Visual harmony and aesthetics.2.Urban design traditions of Myanmar.3.Usual practices of urban design and she expressed that it is not easy to calculate the height of the buildings to be limited exactly.



*Figure 4 Shwedagon restricted zone (Y.C.D.C),*

## **2. Methodology**

The importance and level of significance of representative landmark and symbol of Yangon, Shwedagon Pagoda and its environs of Yangon has been identified by historical value, renown recognized by the community, the architectural value, the syntax of its location within the urban context and from the critical aspects of urban design

The critical aspects of urban design such as Location of dominant structure or landmark, Visual axis, Supremacy of site and structure, Harmony between nature and the structure, Harmony between the structures, Contrast to nature, Deference between the structures, Emphasis of nature, Vista, Skyline are used to study the existing built environment around Shwedagon pagoda.

## **3. Importance and significance of shwedagon pagoda**

The Shwedagon pagoda is the greatest pagoda of its kind in the world, comparable in size and grandeur to the “Angkor Wat” of Cambodia and the “Borobudur” of Indonesia. “Shwe” means gold and Dagon is a former name of Yangon. Shwedagon pagoda means the golden pagoda at the city of Dagon that is Yangon.

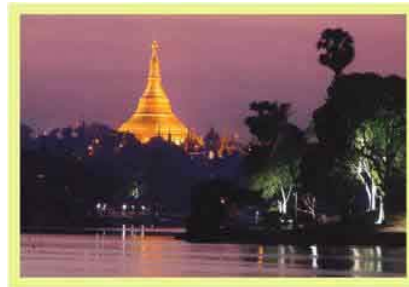
### **3.1. Historical value and reknown recognized by the community**

The Shwedagon pagoda was initially a stupa of 60 feet height built by the King of Oakkalapa 2500 years ago to enshrine 8 sacred hair relics of the Buddha and other sacred relics forming the utensils of three earlier Buddhas. Before it was completed, the Naungdawgyi stupa, which can still be found on the platform of the main stupa was built to house these relics while the latter

was being planned for construction. The name Naungdawgyi which means “elder brother” as it preceded the main shrine. Throughout the ages, a succession of Mon-Myanmar kings have encapsulated the stupa with successive layers raising it to the present height of 326 feet from the plinth to the “diamond bud” final.

### 3.2. Architectural value

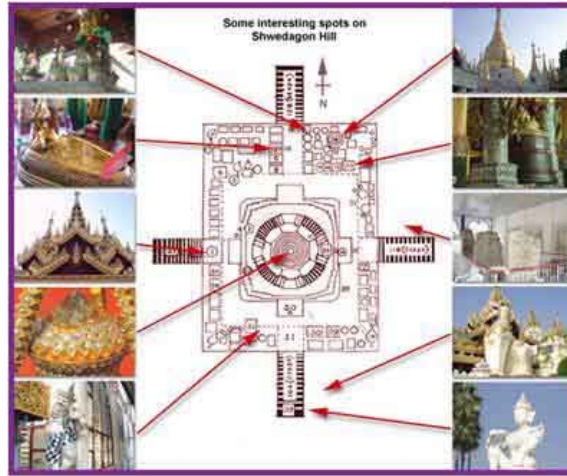
The hill on which the shrine has been built itself is 190 feet above the sea. The stupa rests on a plinth with a perimeter of 1420 feet and is surrounded by a total of 64 subsidiary stupa and four larger ones at the cardinal points where giant stairways and great porches surmounted with flamboyant arched pediments admit the worshipper onto the platform of the pagoda.



*Figure 5. View of the Shwedagon pagoda at night*

On the main stupa itself, the “plantain bud” below the final has a girth of 65 feet, while that the double- lotus band below is about the same. Further below, the oval band called the “turban” is widened to 96 feet 5 inches and below that the bell flares to a circumference of 344 feet 8 inches as it mouth. Of the three terraces below the bell, the first measures 340 feet 9 inches, the second 265 feet and the third 188 feet on each side. The entire stupa from the plinth to the diamond bud final is covered with plates of gold. Rubies, diamonds, emeralds and other gems on the vane, diamond bud and the tiered umbrella final donated by devotees ranging from monarchs to common flock through the ages may well be worth billions.

The platform has a width of 900 feet on the east and north and 700 feet on the west and south. There is a covered stairway at each of the cardinal points with the one on the west being the longest as being the one ascending from the lowest level.



*Figure 6 .Some interesting sports on Shwedagon pagoda*

Stucco carvings, ornamental ironwork, sculptures in marble and alabaster and the art of the jeweler can be appreciated on a leisurely stroll around the platform if one takes the time to look at interesting pavilions, mini-museums and various nooks and corners along the way. Buddhist architecture and religious motifs that have been assimilated into the national culture and then endowed with indigenous forms will be found in abundance. Pavilions for worshippers, rest havens, parasols sculptured out of masonry and many tired ones in metal, planetary post decorated with either mythical beasts or large and small creatures representing them, free-standing towering columns surmounted by the stylized brahminy duck or other symbols and ornamented with cylindrical streamers and tassels proclaiming the presence of a place for worship and the ubiquitous public drinking stands constitutes some of the exotica.

Taking leaves of these minutiae and stepping back to take a look at the main stupa, the elegance in proportion which has overcome its majestic size becomes apparent. One might also feel that the mellow aura bathing it is due to the subtle interplay of reflecting surfaces. Thus even if the first impression should be of its immensity, a lasting one could very well be of its uniqueness and grace.

### **3.3. The syntax of its location within the urban context and from the critical aspect of urban design**

Myanmar is referred to among the nations of the world as “the Golden Land”, the Land of Pagodas” and “the country with the most beautiful spot in this world”. The presence of many golden pagodas, some of them dating back to ancient times has prompted these accolades.



Figure 7. Shwedagon pagoda and its environ

Out of these many pagodas, the distinctive golden spire of the Shwedagon which is visible to traveler in an airplane or a ship from a distance of 30 miles has been the source of inspiration for “the most beautiful sport in the world”. This stupa is more than a place of worship for Buddhists as it is also a repository for artistic cultural treasures and its location.

### 3.3.1. Harmony between structures

On Siguttra Hill, all the structure are being in harmonious relationship with the main structure, Shwedagon Pagoda. The Naung Daw Gyi Pagoda and the Maha Vijaya pagoda have same function, form and color with Shwe Da Gon Pagodas. Considering architecture in relationship to its environment can create unity. The Shwe Da Gon, the Naung Daw Gyi and the new Maha Vijaya , the whole composition keeps unity.



Figure 8. Shwedagon pagoda and Naung Daw Gyi pagoda and Mahar Vijaya pagoda

### 3.3.2. Deferences between structures

The Shwedagon Pagoda and its harmonious prototype, Naung Daw Gyi Pagoda which is giving deference to its main structure. Naung Daw Gyi pagoda is respectfully situated on the lower level and designed smaller in size than the Shwedagon.



*Figure 9 . The satellite map of Shwedagon pagoda*



*Figure 10. Shwedagon pagoda and Naung Daw Gyi pagoda*

### 3.3.3. Emphasis of nature

Shwedagon Pagoda was built on the 190-foot-hill called Singuttra. Natural form is emphasized by complementary urban form to express the importance of the pagoda.



*Figure 11. Shwedagon pagoda on the Singuttra*

### 3.3.4. Supremacy of site and structure

Shwe Dagon Pagoda can be seen through the grand urban space, People's Park and Square. An urban scene of monumental scale can be seen from Pyay Road. It makes supremacy of site and structure over the environs.



Figure 12. View of Shwedagon pagoda from the People's Park and Square

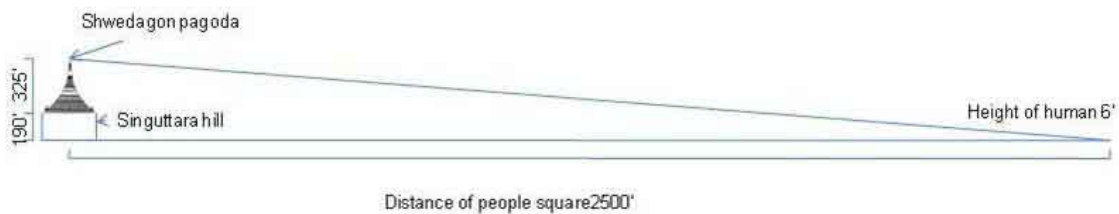


Figure 13. Urban sense of monumental scale

### 3.3.5 visual axis

Visual axis is planned to be directed toward the dominant landmarks and importance structures. "Visual aspect of urban design" by Dr. Kyaw Latt state that to attain the visual power and attention, important landmark and symbol structure, Shwedagon pagoda is place in geometric layout and formalism is usually used in axial planning and long vistas. It can be seen in Yangon map before colonial period.



Figure 14. Map of Yangon before colonial period

### 3.3.6. The skyline of yangon with its landmark, shwedagon pagoda

Viewing from Dala or from the western bank of Hlaing River, figure 17, the skyline of Yangon can be seen forming a harmonious relationship between the Shwedagon Pagoda as a dominant landmark and the rest of the city below it. In the past, the Shwedagon Pagoda was a powerful symbol of Yangon City. The city exploited the topography, and the resulting skyline is not the result of the subtle placing of a single imposing landmark, but the result of a total built form in harmonious relationship with the terrain. The vertical accent tied the heterogeneous elements of the periphery into a single visual unit. The isolated or visually independent hilltop is treated with the important building at the summit. The Shwedagon Pagoda, that do stands out in the skyline derives additional significance to the viewer. Placing it on the crown of the hill turns a lovely shape into a jagged or serrated skyline.



*Figure 15. Viewing Shwedagonpagoda from Dala, the western bank of Ayarwaddy river*

In the past, the highest roofline in the skyline was about 70feet and when compared with the total height of Shwedagon Pagoda which was about 600feet, the visual proportion was roughly 1:9. At the present time, the skyline was being overwhelmed by high-rise buildings of over 20 storied building. This is the destruction of visual supremacy. However, there may be conflict between the development potential of Yangon and urban design control of Shwedagon Environ in Yangon.

## 4. Conclusion

The landmark and symbol of Yangon has been identified how importance and significance according to the above facts. Urban masses, the visual axes to the landmarks and symbols and the skyline can be considered as the physical manifestation of man's culture. Understanding the urban design and the skyline is important. It depends upon the knowledge of the history of cultural development and urban design.

Every built form, old or new, visually manifests the beauty of the whole city especially landmarks and symbols. The appearance of each new building should be considered from the actual vantage points from which they will be seen. Each building should give deference to the existing major landmarks and symbols. The visual impact of the newly built building to its environment should be considered.

Since Myanmar possess landmarks and symbols, important religious buildings, their accessible axes should be carefully planned, with the main

structures in order to climax the architectural massing of the city. It should recognized the concepts of urban design which promote the utility of these concepts in accordance with or in harmony with their nature and cultural traditions of Myanmar.

Such important features of landmarks and symbols in urban design are to be thoughtfully maintained and protected. Without conservation, nothing can be left permanently behind. Our historical landmarks and symbols are in need of strict regulation to preserve and protect the special vistas. This is a matter of great urgency. In Yangon, regulations for the environs of Shwedagon Pagoda had been promulgated in 1996. These restrictions are not supposed to meet the actual requirements of the present condition. Constructions of some newly built buildings threaten to destroy the urban design traditions of Myanmar. These buildings alone may beautifully stand out from their environs, but they can cause a visual impact to our historical landmarks and symbols. Visual axes to these historic landmarks and other traditional urban design principles must be maintained in a deeper sense. It is sincerely hoped that this study may be a contribution in current and future efforts to identify the importance and significance of landmark and symbol, Shwedagon pagoda and to identify and conserve it as an example of landmarks and symbols of Myanmar.

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