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Architecture and Nation-Building in Post-Independent Burma: The Case Study of the Tripitaka Library

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Abstract

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The Tripitaka Library in Yangon, Myanmar (then Burma), designed by the American architect Benjamin Polk and commissioned during the early modernisation period of independent Burma in 1954 under Prime Minister U Nu, represents an understudied example of post-independence architecture in Myanmar. This study demonstrates how the building reflects the relationship between global architectural modernism and local Burmese Buddhist symbolic traditions during the early period of nation-building in independent Burma. The research investigates archival materials, government records, and regional architectural scholarship to analyse the commissioning history and architectural design strategies. The study finds that modern spatial planning and reinforced concrete construction incorporated elements of Buddhist cosmology. The paper argues that the Tripitaka Library illustrates how architectural modernisation in post-colonial Southeast Asia was conceptualised and designed to express religious meaning, national identity, and political ambitions, contributing to broader discussions on architectural modernism and cultural construction while also reviving knowledge of early modernisation in Myanmar.

Keywords: Tripitaka Library, Buddhist Cosmology, Nation-building, Nation-Identity, Post-Colonial Architecture, Post-Independence Burma, Yangon, Myanmar

1. Introduction

The subject of modernism in southeast asia architecture is currently attracting increasing academic focus, primarily through the lens of post-colonial nation building and the internationalization of ideas about modern architecture as they are assimilated within local cultural contexts. Recent scholarship has further emphasized the importance of examining Southeast Asian architecture through postcolonial and international perspectives, highlighting how architectural forms emerged through negotiations between global modernism and local cultural identities (Abdullah & Kim, 2022; Lin, 2022). There has recently been a significant amount of research done on how the newly independent states of southeast asia utilized modernist architectural forms to portray progress, legitimacy, and national identity for their new nations (Hayashi et al., 2024). As there is a great deal of recent scholarship being produced on southeast asian modernism, however, the development of post-independence architecture in Burma (Myanmar) remains less researched than many other areas. Although several individual buildings which illustrate the interactions between modernist architectural language and the symbolic traditions of buddhism have been studied; the majority of them have not been given adequate analytical attention. A notable example of one such structure is the Tripitaka Library located in Yangon. designed by the American architect, Benjamin Polk and commissioned during the early years of independence under prime minister U Nu, the library houses the buddhist scriptures compiled during the sixth buddhist synod (1954 – 1956). therefore, the Tripitaka Library serves as a significant intersection point between architectural modernization, religious heritage and state-sponsored preservation of culture. Unfortunately, however, the Tripitaka Library has rarely been examined in broader discussions of architectural modernism in southeast asia, nor in studies of post-independence Burmese architecture.



Figure 1.1.1 Benjamin Polk and U Nu standing in the main library rotunda. Burma's first post-independence prime minister was a devout Buddhist, using religion as an expedient tool for nation building, 1962. (source: Tripitaka Library)

Therefore, this study addresses both empirical and analytical gaps by examining how the architectural design of the Tripitaka Library illustrates the interaction between global architectural modernism and Burmese Buddhist cosmological symbolic traditions during the early period of nation-building in independent Burma. This research will ask: How was modern architectural language expressed in the design of the Tripitaka Library? How were Buddhist symbolic and cosmological ideas incorporated into its spatial organisation and architectural form? How did the building reflect the political and cultural ambitions of post-independence Burma under U Nu? By answering these questions, it will contribute to wider debates regarding how modern architecture in post-colonial settings was constructed to express religious meaning, cultural identity and political ambitions.

By using archival materials, government records and regional architectural scholarship, this study investigates the history surrounding the commissioning and architectural design strategies of the building. By doing so, this study seeks to demonstrate how modern methods of construction and planning for space were integrated with elements of Burmese cosmology. Furthermore, this paper provides contributions to larger debates regarding architectural modernism, cultural hybridity, and nation building in Southeast Asia while also bringing renewed scholarly focus on early architectural modernization in Myanmar.

1.1 Background and Context

There are two parts to the Tripitaka Library (Pitaka Taik) in Yangon; the library itself, and the larger historical context in which it is sited. This larger history includes both the colonial era and the nation building process of Burma's independence. During Britain's colonial domination of Burma (1885-1948), Rangoon underwent significant changes in its urban and institutional structure (Thitsar, 2016). Colonial administrators introduced new systems of city planning, new schools and new architectural styles (Sugarman, 2018). At the same time, colonialism undermined many traditional Buddhist organizations that had been the center of knowledge creation and culture in Burma. When Burma gained independence from Britain in 1948, U Nu's government sought to rebuild Buddhism as a source of national identity and to integrate religion with other aspects of cultural and political rebirth. After independence, Burma pursued political neutrality while receiving assistance from different international sources, including the United States, Great Britain, and China (Thitsar, 2018). This was occurring at a time when a number of newly independent countries were trying to position themselves relative to each other as well as to the emerging superpowers during the Cold War (Kawanami, 2016). Many of these countries including Burma pursued "neutral" or non-aligned foreign policies, thus they were able to seek technical assistance and advice on their own terms from a variety of different places. Large-scale cultural and religious programs (e.g., the Sixth Buddhist Council held in 1954-56) were not just spiritual programs but also examples of national diplomacy intended to demonstrate Burma's identity globally (Liang, 1990). During the early 1950s, the government pursued national development through the Pyidawtha programme, which emphasised the systematic mobilisation of Burma's natural and human resources for economic and social reconstruction (Knappen Tippetts Abnett McCarthy, Pierce Management, Inc., & Robert R. Nathan Associates, Inc., 1953). The Tripitaka Library was part of this larger program of rebuilding. It would serve not only as a storage place for sacred texts, but also as an example of modern architectural expression of intellectual and religious authority.

U Nu and Benjamin Polk's collaborative relationship can be seen in relation to the larger network of international professionals involved in exchanges concerning development in South and Southeast Asia in the early 1950s. Before being selected to build the Tripitaka Library, Polk had already developed a reputation throughout the region for his design and planning services in India and Pakistan, much of which he received funding for from international organizations (i.e., Ford Foundation) (McCarthy, 1995). These connections placed him among a larger community of foreign experts who moved about newly independent states. Because Burma needed technical assistance for several high-profile national projects associated with the Sixth Buddhist Council, architects like Polk emerged as possible candidates based upon these regional networks. Once commissioned, Polk collaborated with U Nu regarding all phases of the Tripitaka Library's construction (Ministry of Local Planning and Religion affairs, Burma, 1965). U Nu's personal interest in Buddhism and

national development influenced every phase of the project, and ultimately resulted in a structure using modern architectural techniques to represent a deeply symbolic religious purpose (Kawanami, 2016).

In addition to the Tripitaka Library's construction, the 1950s represented a period of expanded educational opportunities and institutional modernization in Burma (Subramanian & Sein, 2021). The state invested money into universities, technical education, museums, etc. to foster national growth. Architecture became a means for modernizing while maintaining tradition. Therefore, Polk's participation represents how knowledge from abroad crossed paths with internal priorities. Instead of adopting Western architectural designs wholesale, Burmese authorities modified them according to their use of symbolism.

Construction on the Tripitaka Library completed circa 1961 marks its conclusion within this transitional decade. The 1962 military coup transformed Burma's politics and culture toward socialism, severely limiting international cooperation and restructuring state structures. Thus, the Tripitaka Library constitutes a particular point in history defined by postcolonial regeneration, religious resurgence, and limited globalization.

1.2 Problem Statement and Research Gap

Despite its historical and architectural importance, the Tripitaka Library has received limited attention in architectural scholarship on Myanmar. Thitsar (2016) discusses the Tripitaka Library as a major post-independence national project associated with the Sixth Buddhist Council, emphasizing its role in expressing Buddhism, nation-building, and modernity through symbolic architectural forms and reinforced concrete construction. Similarly, Su Su et al. (2017) interpret the building as a modern Buddhist work by Benjamin Polk that integrated Buddhist cosmology, symbolic spatial organization, and traditional inspirations within a modern architectural language. Lin (2023) argues that architectural production in contemporary Asia cannot be understood solely through Western architectural narratives, but must be examined through local processes of cultural adaptation and postcolonial identity formation. This perspective is particularly relevant to the Tripitaka Library, where international modernist design was reinterpreted through Burmese Buddhist symbolism and national aspirations.

There is still insufficient analysis of how the Tripitaka Library's modern form was shaped by both local ideological aims and international professional collaboration, particularly through the involvement of Benjamin Polk. The building has not been adequately studied as a case that connects Buddhist symbolism, post-colonial modernization, and foreign architectural expertise. This gap limits understanding of how architecture in post-independence Burma functioned not only as a religious setting but also as a medium of cultural identity, political aspiration, and nation-building before the 1962 coup.

1.3 Objectives and Hypotheses

This paper aims to examine the Tripitaka Library as a significant case of post-independence architecture in Burma by situating it within the international political and cultural context of the 1950s and early 1960s. It seeks to analyse how the building reflects the state's efforts in nation-building, Buddhist revival, and institutional modernization under U Nu. The study also aims to investigate how Benjamin Polk's design interpreted modern architectural approaches to local religious meanings, symbolic requirements, and environmental conditions, thereby contributing to a distinct architectural expression within Myanmar's early post-colonial context.

The paper hypothesizes that the Tripitaka Library was not a simple importation of foreign modernism, but a hybrid architectural work shaped by the interaction of Burmese political-religious aspirations and international professional expertise. It argues that the building embodied a modern institutional form while simultaneously expressing Buddhist symbolism and national cultural identity. In this sense, the library can be understood as both a product of post-independence modernization and a medium through which the Burmese state articulated its ideological and cultural ambitions.

1.4 Significance of the Study

This paper is significant because it examines the Tripitaka Library as an understudied case of post-independence architecture in Myanmar and uses it to explore how modern architecture was constructed to have local religious and political meanings in 1950s Burma. Although the building is associated with U Nu's Buddhist nation-building agenda and with the American architect Benjamin Polk, it has received limited focused analysis within scholarship on Southeast Asian modernism and post-colonial architecture. By studying the library through its commissioning history, architectural form, and symbolic program, the paper contributes to broader debates on post-colonial modernism, cultural hybridity, and the role of architecture in expressing national identity and political aspiration.

2. Materials and Methods

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach to examine the Tripitaka Library in Yangon as a post-independence architectural work situated at the intersection of modernisation, Buddhist symbolism, and nation-building in Burma. The research focuses on one building as a historically specific case through which broader relationships among architecture, politics, religion, and international exchange can be interpreted. A single-case approach is appropriate because the Tripitaka Library remains understudied and requires close examination of its commissioning context, architectural form, and symbolic meaning.

The materials used in this study consist of archival and documentary sources, published historical accounts, and architectural evidence. These include records and writings related to post-independence Burma, U Nu's religious and political agenda, the Sixth Buddhist Synod, Benjamin Polk's professional work, and available descriptions, photographs, and drawings of the Tripitaka Library. Secondary scholarship on post-colonial modernism, Southeast Asian architecture, and Burma's political context is also used to situate the case within wider historical and theoretical discussions. Sources

were selected according to three criteria: first, their relevance to the commissioning and historical background of the project; second, their value for understanding the building's architectural design and spatial organisation; and third, their usefulness for interpreting symbolic and cultural meanings.

The method combines three interconnected forms of analysis. First, document analysis is used to reconstruct the historical context of the project. Archival materials, government-related accounts, and published sources are examined to identify the circumstances of commission, the involving actors, and the broader political and religious setting in which the library was developed. Second, architectural analysis is used to examine the building itself. This includes analysis of spatial organisation, massing, circulation, structural expression, material use, and the relationship between modern architectural language and local symbolic references. Third, interpretive analysis is applied to assess how Buddhist meanings and national-cultural aspirations were expressed through architectural form. Rather than treating the building only as a functional object, this approach reads it as a cultural and political artifact shaped by both design decisions and historical intention.

To strengthen interpretation, the study places the Tripitaka Library within a broader comparative field of post-independence architecture in Asia, although the paper remains centered on a single case. The comparison is not a full comparative study, but a contextual strategy used to clarify how this building participates in wider regional patterns of intertwinement between global modernism and local cultural identity. Through this method, the paper aims to show not only what the Tripitaka Library looks like, but also how and why its architectural form emerged in relation to post-colonial Burma's religious, political, and modernising ambitions.

2.1 Research Framework

This research adopts a qualitative historical–architectural case study design to examine the Tripitaka Library in Yangon, Myanmar, as a representative example of post-independence architectural production. A case study approach is appropriate because it allows detailed investigation of a specific building within its historical, political, and cultural context, enabling deeper interpretation of architectural form, spatial organization, and symbolic meaning. In architectural history research, case studies are commonly used to understand how individual buildings reflect broader social, political, and cultural processes (Groat & Wang, 2013). By focusing on the Tripitaka Library as a single case, the study aims to analyse how architectural modernism was constructed within the context of nation-building and Buddhist revival in post-independence Burma.

The geographical setting of this study is Yangon (formerly Rangoon), which served as the political, cultural, and administrative centre of Burma during the early post-independence period. Following independence in 1948, the country entered a phase of political consolidation and national reconstruction under the parliamentary government of Prime Minister U Nu. During the 1950s, the government promoted modernization policies while maintaining a neutral foreign policy and emphasizing the cultural significance of Buddhism within national identity (Adeleke, 2003; Lall, 2008). In this context, Yangon became the primary site for major institutional, educational, and religious developments that symbolized the aspirations of the new nation.

The Tripitaka Library was developed as part of the broader religious and cultural initiatives associated with the Sixth Buddhist Synod held in Yangon between 1954 and 1956. This event was strongly supported by the Burmese government and represented an effort to reaffirm Burma's role as a major centre of Theravāda Buddhist scholarship (Bansal, 2017). The library was intended to serve as a repository and research centre for Buddhist scriptures and scholarly study. Located within the wider Kaba Aye religious complex, the building reflects the intersection of religion, politics, and architectural modernisation during the U Nu era. Studying this building within its historical and urban setting therefore provides insight into how architecture functioned not only as physical infrastructure but also as a cultural and political instrument in post-independence Burma.

2.2 Case Selection

The Tripitaka Library was chosen as the main case study due to its importance culturally, historically and architecturally relating to the period of post independence Burma. The Tripitaka Library was constructed in the initial years of National Re-Construction by Prime Minister U Nu. This building is one of several buildings built by the Government as part of the Six Buddhist Synod which was held in Rangoon from 1954 to 1956. It was a large State funded religious event that would enable Burma to be established as a central base of knowledge for Theravada Buddhism and to enhance Buddhist identity as a result of gaining independence. The Tripitaka Library was envisioned as a collection for all Buddhist Scriptures, and also as a center for academic study. The two were linked together through religion, and the ambitions of the Post Independence Government.

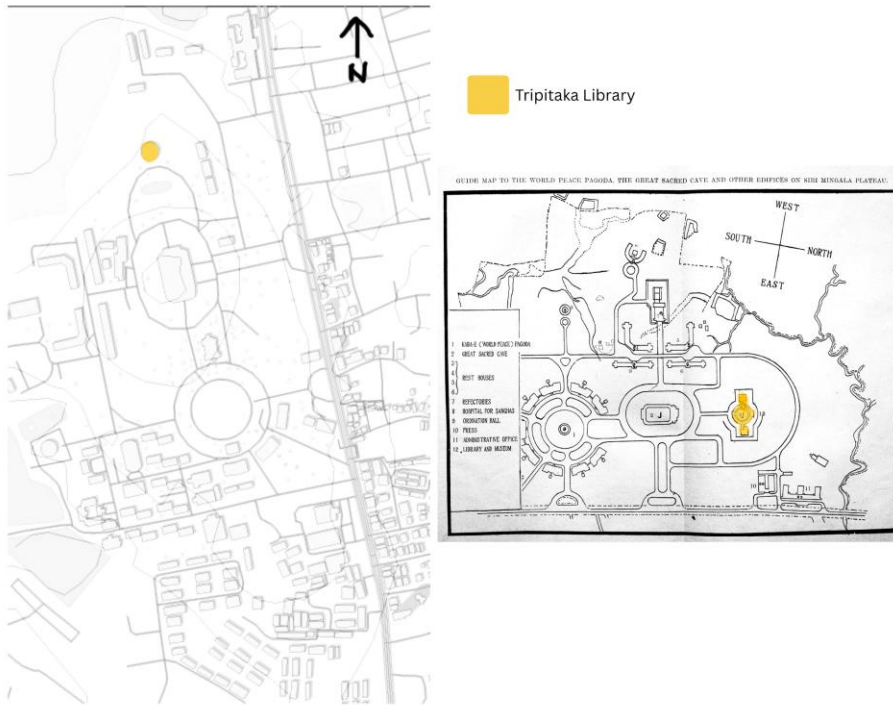


Fig 2.2.1 Location of the library within the Pagoda’s vicinity (source: Department for the promotion and propagation of the Sasana, Ministry of Religion Affairs and Culture ,Author).

It can be said that the building is important due to its being the work of the American architect Benjamin Polk. This demonstrates an international network of professionals who engaged with each other in terms of their architectural practice, in the context of developing Asia especially India after colonial rule. Polk had previously worked on institutional buildings in South Asia and began to accept architectural commissions in Burma during the 1950s. In designing the Tripitaka Library he used modernist architectural techniques such as reinforced concrete, functional spatial arrangements and minimalist geometry, yet incorporated the symbolic elements of Buddhism relating to the sacred. Thus, it represents a use of modernist global architectural ideas for local cultural and religious needs.

The study of the Tripitaka Library is also justified by the fact that there are few academic studies that include this building in examinations of modern architecture in Myanmar. Although the library may be mentioned occasionally in analyses of the Sixth Buddhist Council and U Nu's religious policies; comprehensive architectural assessments have been made infrequently within previous literature. Therefore, when analyzing the Tripitaka Library as part of a focused case study, the researcher will produce original knowledge relative to post-independence architecture in Myanmar. Furthermore, through this specific case, the research will examine how architecture served as both a built form and as a medium to convey politically, culturally, and spiritually meaningful messages at a time of national growth and development.

2.3 Materials and Sources

The source material used in this study includes architectural, historical and photographic records. Photographs from the archives; architectural plans, drawings and maps; and documents providing historical information regarding the Tripitaka Library were all analyzed. In addition, comparisons with similar structures completed throughout Southeast Asia during the 1950's-60's provided additional contextualized comparative analysis. The use of these multiple formats of visual and textual data supported identification of architectural form and spatial relationships among structural elements and building systems as well as symbolic elements present in buildings created during specific periods in time. Architectural photographs and drawings have been considered particularly useful to researchers of architectural history due to their ability to document the original design intent of architects and the physical condition of buildings when they were initially built (Ching, 2015).

Architectural theory and history scholarly studies which address post-colonial economic development; architectural modernism; and Southeast Asian architectural history provided an appropriate theoretical framework to understand how architecture has reflected social, political and cultural changes (Chang & bin Tajudeen, 2019; Van der Straeten & Hasenöhr, 2016). Additionally, research concerning architectural modernism in Myanmar and other nations of Southeast



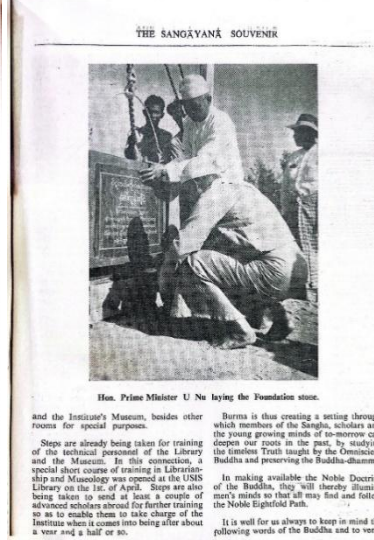
The International **B**UDDHIST Centre as it will appear on Completion.

spirital ties of South-East Asia and of fostering and encouraging understanding between the East and the West. To advise on development of the research sources and cultural studies of the Institute, Dr. Nihar-Ranjan Ray, Bagnivan Professor of Indian Art at the University of Calcutta, has been appointed by the Foundation as Consultant to the Government.

As the Institute's nucleus it has been decided to establish at a fairly high scholastic and academic level a well-equipped Library containing books of an original and scholarly nature, books of more general nature but not widely available, manuscripts and copies of manuscripts, Oriental periodicals, microfilms, slides, maps and atlases, etc. and whatever original sources and source materials it is possible to obtain. A large segment of the Library will be air-conditioned and equipped with microfilm and photographic apparatus, projector and screen manuscript and microfilm reading rooms, general reading room, rare books reading room and research alcoves. It will also be necessary to maintain a Museum exhibiting specimens of Buddhist importance, including inscriptions, scriptures, bronzes, seals, tablets, coins, etc.

but the Museum will not aim to achieve the status and extent of any future National Museum. The Institute will also make provision for the maintenance of Research Fellows of whom at least a few are to be from Foreign countries. The Institute is intended to work in close co-operation with the Oriental, History and Philosophy Departments of the University of Rangoon, with the Burma Research Society, the Archaeological Survey of Burma and with the National Library and the National Museum when the latter two come to being.

Architecturally, the Institute, which will have the northern entrance of the majestic Assembly Hall, will consist of a central circular building in three storeys; this circular building will have three annexes, two flanking the two sides and the third at the back. The ground and the first floor of the central circular building, of which a considerable portion will be air-conditioned, are designed to house the main library, while the second floor will be the sacred shelter for the restored version of the Buddhist Tripitaka as adopted by the Sixth Buddhist Council. The three annexes will be provided with, among other things, a general reading room for general readers, an auditorium



Hon. Prime Minister U Nu laying the Foundation stone.

and the Institute's Museum, besides other rooms for special purposes.

Steps are already being taken for training of the technical personnel of the Library and the Museum. In this connection, a special short course of training in Librarianship and Museology was opened at the USN Library on the 1st of April. Steps are also being taken to send at least a couple of advanced scholars abroad for further training so as to enable them to take charge of the Institute when it comes into being after about a year and a half or so.

Burma is thus creating a setting through which members of the Sangha, scholars and the young growing minds of to-morrow can deepen our roots in the past, by studying the timeless Truth taught by the Omniscient Buddha and preserving the Buddha-dharma.

In making available the Noble Doctrine of the Buddha, they will thereby illumine man's mind so that all may find and follow the Noble Eightfold Path.

It is well for us always to keep in mind the following words of the Buddha and to vene-

Fig 2.3.1 An article about the Tripitaka library. (Source: The Sangayana Souvenir)

Asia assisted in placing the Tripitaka Library into a larger regional architectural evolution subsequent to independence (SuSu et al., 2017). As such, all of these resources support the idea that architecture is both a physical entity; and a culturally-based artifact reflecting national aspirations through religion; modernization; and politics.

2.4 Data Collection Methods

Archival research - reviewing past documents, photos, designs and literature about the selected case study buildings will provide a foundation for this research. Archival research provides the means by which to establish the historical context, design evolution, and architectural influences associated with the buildings being studied (Groat & Wang, 2013). Field observations are also included in the research; visiting select sites in Yangon to visually assess the building's layout, condition of materials and environmental response. Field observation will allow the researcher to identify architectural attributes that cannot be identified from historical documentation.

Additionally, visual documentation, through photography will be used to document architectural details and spatial relationship. Additionally, when appropriate, informal conversations with architects, conservators or local academic scholars knowledgeable about history and culture of the buildings will be engaged as an additional source of information on where to find related academic sources. Through combining archival and field based data collection methods, a comprehensive analysis of the historical and physical components of each of the case study buildings can be established (Groat & Wang, 2013).

2.5 Data Analysis and Interpretation

The collected data will be analysed using several analytical approaches appropriate for architectural research. The first method is architectural form analysis, which examines the physical characteristics of buildings, including structural systems, spatial layout, materials, and climatic adaptations. This analysis helps identify how architectural design responds to environmental conditions while reflecting modernist design principles (Forty, 2000).

Secondly, the research applies comparative analysis, in which the selected buildings are compared with other examples of educational modern architecture of other post independence countries in Asia. This approach allows the identification of similarities and differences in architectural design, regional adaptations, and international influences within the context of post-colonial modernization.

Finally, the research employs thematic interpretation, linking architectural features to broader historical themes such as modernization, national identity, and Cold War cultural exchange. Through this interpretive approach, architecture is analysed not only as a functional structure but also as a medium through which political ideas, cultural identity, and social values are expressed (Groat & Wang, 2013; Forty, 2000).

3. Results

3.1 Historical Background of the Commission

At the beginning of independent Burma's existence, the new government led by Prime Minister U Nu pursued an active promotion of Buddhism as a method to strengthen national unity, promote the continuation of culture, and improve the international religious status of Burma. As part of this broad program, a Tripitaka Library was included as part of the Kaba Aye Religious Complex located in Yangon. The archival documents indicate that the library would provide a central depository for Buddhist scripture, manuscript, and sacred objects, while also conserving Burma's literature, customs, and cultural heritage for future generations and for presentation to the international community (Ngwe, 1978; Ministry of Local Planning and Religion affairs, Burma, 1965). The commissioning of monumental institutional and religious architecture during this period was directly aligned with the state's broader vision of a prosperous, culturally revived 'New Burma' (Government of the Union of Burma, 1954).

In addition, the commission provides evidence for the interdependent relationships existing between architecture, state-formation and religious policies within post-independence Burma. Ngwe (1978) states that according to later documentation provided by U Nu, he envisioned the project combining modern technology and knowledge with national artistry. Therefore, the design process involved cooperation among American architect Benjamin Polk, Burmese

engineers, and other foreign experts in concert with Burmese ideological leadership (Ngwe, 1978; Ministry of Local Planning and Religion affairs, Burma, 1965). Bansal (2017) similarly points out that U Nu appointed Polk at a time when the sixth great synod of world Buddhism had convened and the purpose of the library was to hold the texts associated with this large international meeting of Buddhists.

The construction of both the world Buddhist University and the Tripitaka Library begun on March 4th, 1954. U Nu officially opened the complex on Kason Full Moon Day in the Burmese Year of 1321 (Ngwe, 1978; Ministry of Local Planning and Religion affairs, Burma, 1965). However, the construction progressed in stages. The museum structure was initially not completed upon its official opening and was later resumed by the revolutionary government after 1962 prior to being formally opened on April 25th, 1964 (Ministry of Local Planning and Religion affairs, Burma, 1965). It is this phased development that supports understanding the Tripitaka Library not solely as a singular building but rather as a component of a greater institutional and symbolic programs associated with the reviving of Buddhism and nation-building.

Therefore, from an historic perspective, the commission can be viewed to have served two functions. First, it was constructed to conserve the Tripitaka and to support Buddhist studies. Second, it was designed to represent a national cultural institution through which Burma could demonstrate itself as a modern Buddhist nation. Consequently, the Tripitaka Library illustrates how architectural production in post-independence Burma has been influenced by three factors: religion, politics, and international exchange.

3.2 Architectural Design and Spatial Organization

The Tripitaka Library complex was designed as a multi-building institutional ensemble rather than as a single building. According to Ngwe (1978) and the Ministry of Local Planning and Religion affairs, Burma documents (1965), the overall composition consisted of four principal parts: the central Tripitaka repository, a wing containing a discussion hall and Ceylon exhibition hall, another wing containing a Thai exhibition hall and reading room, and a museum building to the rear. This arrangement suggests that the project was conceived as a complete centre for preservation, study, research, and exhibition.

The initial proposal emphasized the construction of an exceptionally durable, vault-like structure, reflecting the perceived sacred and irreplaceable value of the Tipitaka. Participants envisioned a secure, underground, cave-like building designed to ensure long-term preservation and protection from both natural and human threats, often conceptualized in Buddhist terms as the “five enemies.”

This architectural intention must also be understood within the broader geopolitical context of the early atomic age. The devastation caused by the atomic bombing of Hiroshima remained a powerful reference point, reinforcing fears of large-scale destruction in the event of future global conflict. In this context, the safeguarding of the Tipitaka was framed as a moral and religious responsibility. The proposal for a subterranean, fortified repository thus reflects both spiritual priorities and contemporary anxieties, linking religious preservation with modern concerns over security and permanence. At the centre of the composition stood the main repository, which was circular in plan and contained a basement and three storeys above ground (Ngwe, 1978; Ministry of Local Planning and Religion affairs, Burma, 1965). The ground floor included a circular water basin and fountain at its centre. Upper levels housed storage rooms for manuscripts and the Tipitaka chamber, while meditation spaces and gardens were also incorporated into the wider complex (Ministry of Local Planning and Religion affairs, Burma, 1965). Bansal (2017) describes the central building as a bright radial design, while a design model reproduced in his article identifies the three wings as containing a public library, auditorium, and religious museum, with the central core reserved for scholars and monks as a sanctuary for study and meditation. This arrangement indicates that the building was organised through both functional hierarchy and symbolic centrality. The central core was not treated as ordinary circulation space but as a protected intellectual and spiritual zone. Public and semi-public functions were distributed in the surrounding wings, whereas sacred knowledge was concentrated in the core and upper levels. The plan therefore expresses a layered structure of access, moving from more open institutional functions toward increasingly restricted and symbolically important areas.

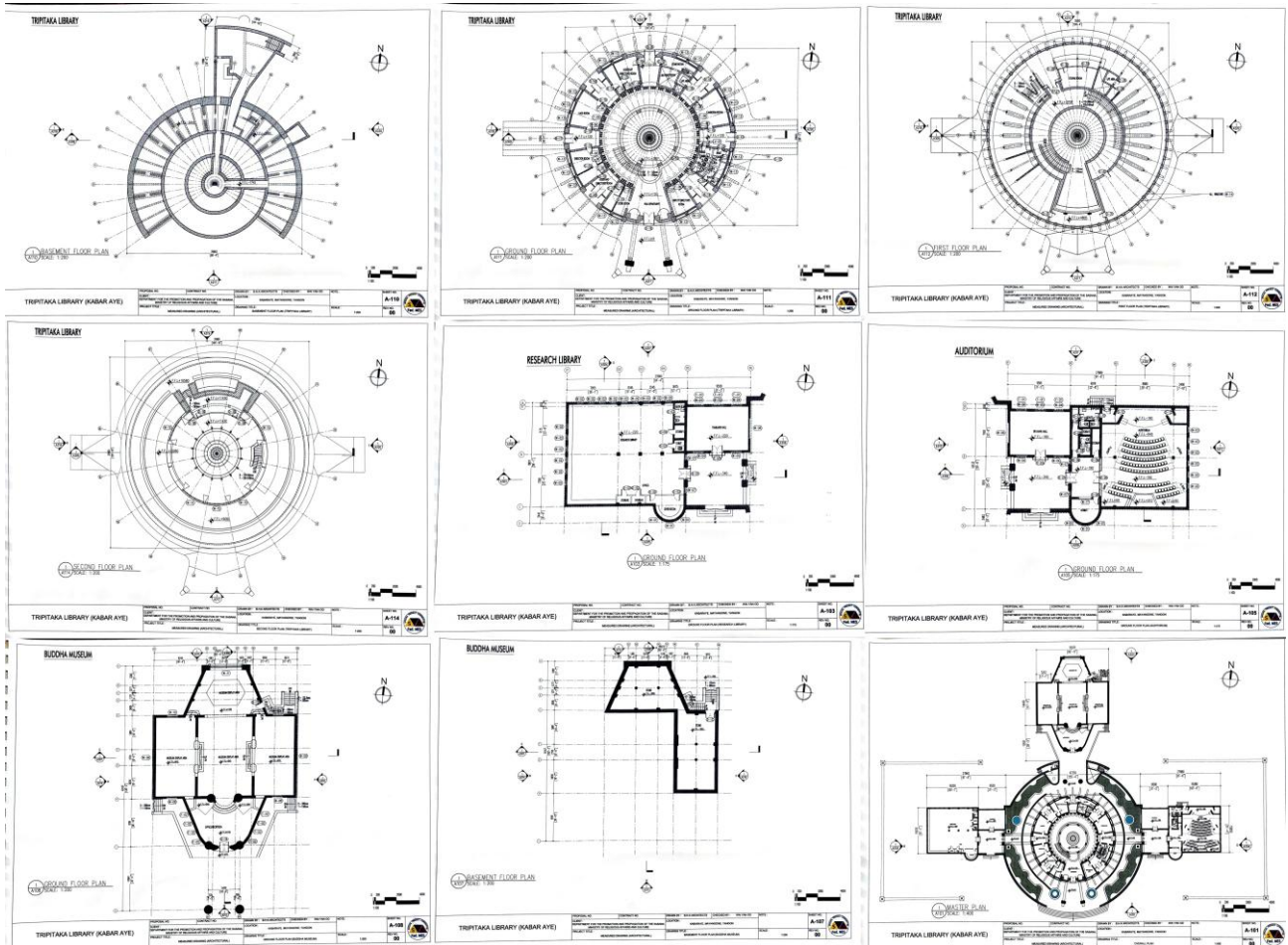


Figure 3.2.1 Floor plans of the Tripitaka library left to right; 1st row :basement floor plan, ground floor plan, 1st floor plan of the main library core, 2nd row: 2nd floor plan of the main library core, Research library Wing ground floor plan, Auditorium Wing ground floor plan, 3rd row: Buddha Museum Wing's ground floor plan and 1st floor plan, Overall of Tripitaka Library's ground floor plan (source: Department for the promotion and propagation of the Sasana, Ministry of Religion Affairs and Culture).

The institutional programme of the complex was also extensive. Administrative offices were located within the main library building, while research offices were opened in one of the exhibition halls (Ministry of Local Planning and Religion affairs, Burma, 1965). The research department was responsible for writing Buddhist history in Burma and other countries and for preparing documentary materials on stupas, pagodas, and religious monuments. The records indicate the production of hundreds of historical extracts, summaries, and reference boards, demonstrating that the complex functioned as an active centre of knowledge production rather than a passive storage facility (Ministry of Local Planning and Religion affairs, Burma, 1965).

The library holdings themselves were substantial. They included Theravāda and Mahāyāna manuscripts, inscriptions, printed books, kammawā bundles, royal orders, English-language books, magazines, and journals. The source records more than ten thousand literary works, over two thousand manuscripts, and over 170 inscription slabs, indicating the scale of the institution and its significance as a centre of Buddhist scholarship (Ngwe, 1978; Ministry of Local Planning and Religion affairs, Burma, 1965).

The museum extended this scholarly function into a public and international register. It was described as a major Buddhist cultural museum in Southeast Asia and was intended to support the activities of the World Buddhist University (Ministry of Local Planning and Religion affairs, Burma, 1965). Artefacts from Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, China, Japan, Tibet, Nepal, India, Pakistan, and Ceylon were displayed in separate halls, while another hall was devoted specifically to regional Buddhist culture within Burma (Ministry of Local Planning and Religion affairs, Burma, 1965). This arrangement positioned Burma not as an isolated Buddhist nation but as a participant in a wider Buddhist world.

The decision to construct the Tripitaka Library can be traced to a series of high-level meetings held in the early 1950s in preparation for the Sixth Buddhist Synod. On 13 September 1951, a meeting convened at the residence of U Nu, followed by a second meeting on 17 May 1952 at the home of the Minister of Religious Affairs, U Win. During these discussions, it was unanimously agreed that a purpose-built repository should be constructed to securely house the scriptures to be compiled for the Synod.

3.3 Modernist Architectural Features

The Tripitaka Library represents a significant manifestation of mid-twentieth-century institutional modernism, characterized by a structural and formal logic that prioritizes permanence and functional order. While the building utilizes the technological advancements of the Modern Movement, its architectural language departs from the "International Style" commonly associated with Western mid-century architecture. Curtis (1982) argues that Western modern architecture sought forms appropriate to modern industrial society through new spatial concepts, structural innovation, abstraction, and functional organization. Within this broader framework, modernist design frequently emphasized visual lightness, transparency, open planning, and devices such as pilotis to create spatial freedom. Modern architecture in post-independence Myanmar demonstrates that modernist principles such as pilotis, free plan, free façade, flat roofs, and horizontal windows were not simply adopted from Western models but were adapted according to local climatic conditions, cultural traditions, and social contexts (Thitsar, 2018). In contrast, the Tripitaka Library adopts a more monumental form of modernism, reflecting a "new consciousness" of regional identity and nation-building in post-independence Myanmar (Su Su et al., 2017).

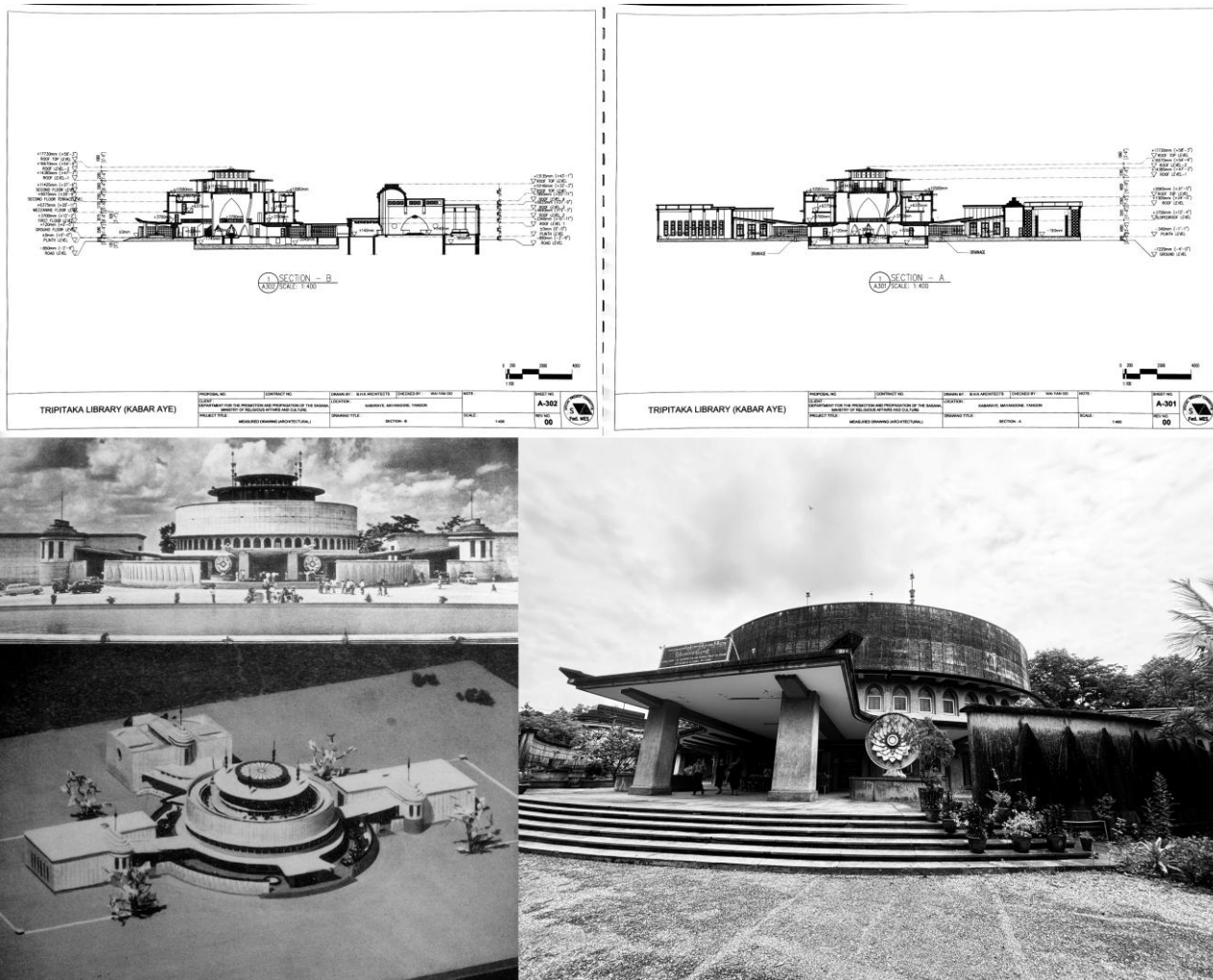


Figure 3.3.1 Sectional plans, old and current conditions of the Library (source : Department for the promotion and propagation of the Sasana, Ministry of Religion Affairs and Culture, Author).

The building's modernist character is primarily established through its structural framework and industrial materials usage. The complex was constructed using a reinforced concrete system supported by large beams and columns (Ngwe, 1978; Ministry of Local Planning and Religion Affairs, Burma, 1965). According to construction records, the building incorporated a diverse range of modern materials, including steel bars, terrazzo, and waterproof cement, alongside high-quality local materials such as teak and various stone slabs. This combination indicates a "durable and modern construction materials" designed to provide the stability and longevity required for a major public institution. The circular plan, radial ordering, and clearly differentiated programme express a disciplined architectural logic. Yet the Tripitaka Library does not follow a purely abstract international style. The spatial organization of the Tripitaka Library reflects a disciplined modernist approach to institutional planning. The design is governed by a clear geometric clarity, featuring a central circular repository that serves as the organizational core. Exhibition halls, reading rooms, and administrative offices are arranged around this core through a hierarchical spatial order. This layout shows a modern concern for functional zoning and circulation, ensuring that different programmatic requirements are clearly differentiated yet unified within a single architectural ensemble. Unlike the highly abstract and standardized language of Western International Style modernism, the Tripitaka Library employed geometric organization, monumentality, and centralized massing to reinforce its role as a major national and institutional complex. These features suggest a modern concern for controlled light, material finish, and planned exhibition space.

An equally important part of the architectural composition is the large oval reflecting pool placed to the east of the complex. The documents record that the pool measured approximately 200 feet in length, 69 feet in width, and 4 feet in depth (Ministry of Local Planning and Religion affairs, Burma, 1965). Its function was not merely decorative. The source explicitly states that the architecture was heavy in visual effect and that the architects introduced the clear water surface to counterbalance this heaviness. The reflecting pool therefore formed part of the architectural composition itself, creating visual lightness, reflection, and what the Burmese text refers to as a kind of transparency or clarity in the overall ensemble (Ministry of Local Planning and Religion affairs, Burma, 1965).

The documents compare this use of water to older precedents in Burmese religious architecture, suggesting continuity between modern design and earlier compositional strategies (Ministry of Local Planning and Religion affairs, Burma, 1965). The Tripitaka Library illustrates that the adoption of modern architecture in post-independence Burma was not a copy of Western trends but an interactive process of interpretation. By using modern materials like reinforced concrete to create monumental and formally ordered spaces, the architects developed a localized form of modernism (Su Su et al., 2017). This "conservative" or monumental modernism allowed for the integration of modern structural technology with a formal stability suited to the country's institutional requirements, representing a critical departure from the universalizing claims of mainstream Western modern architecture. For that reason, the Tripitaka Library should be understood as a hybrid modernism in which reinforced concrete structure, geometric order, and local visual logic were combined into a distinctive post-independence architectural language.

3.4 Integration of Buddhist Symbolism

Buddhist symbolism in the Tripitaka Library is embedded primarily in its institutional role, spatial ordering, and representational programme rather than in surface ornament alone. At the most basic level, the building was created to preserve and share Buddhist knowledge. The repository, research offices, library collections, and museum together formed an institutional landscape centred on the safeguarding and interpretation of Buddhist tradition (Ngwe, 1978; Ministry of Local Planning and Religion affairs, Burma, 1965). In this respect, the architecture itself became a material embodiment of Buddhist learning.

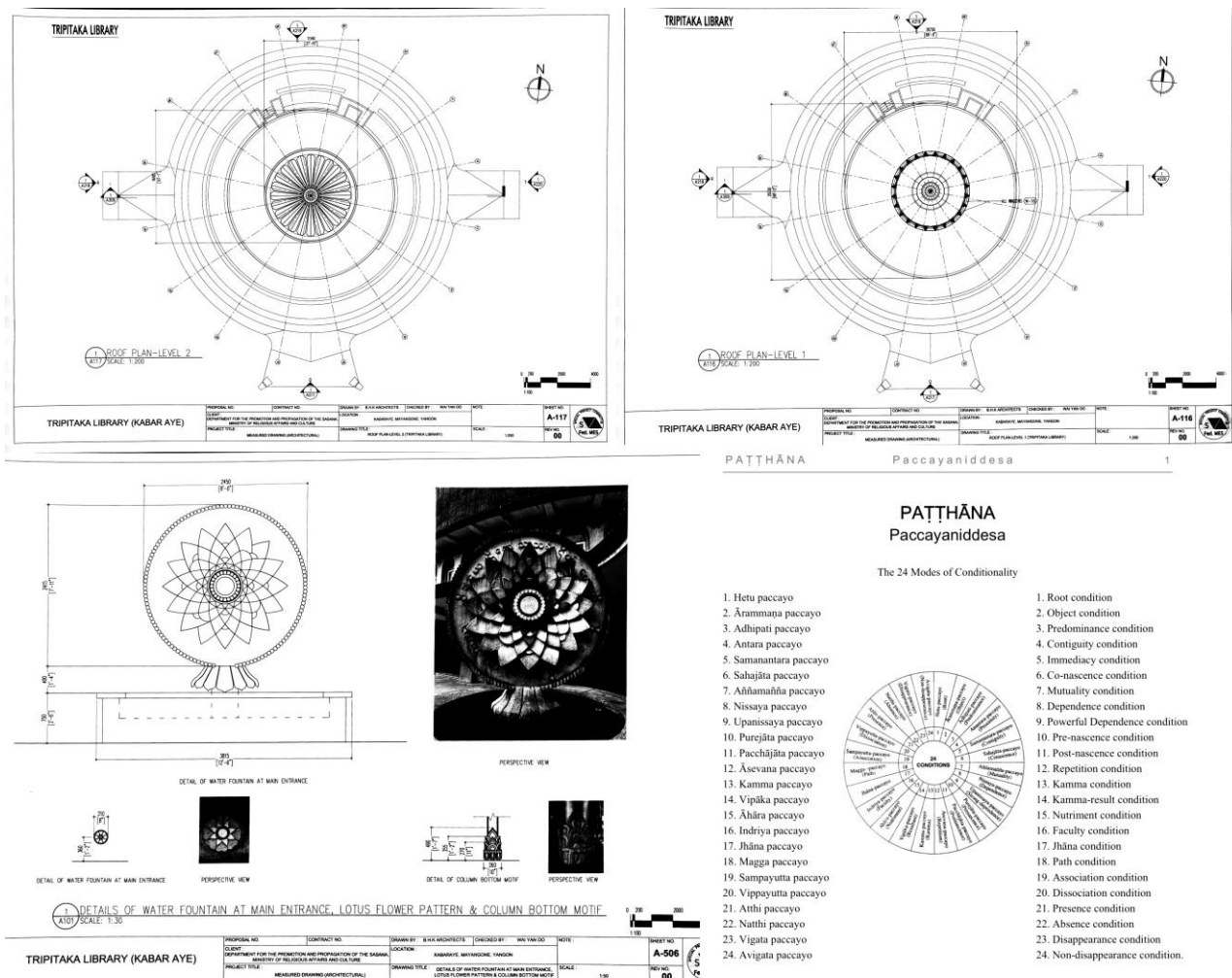


Figure 3.4.1 Details of the roof, window and water fountain that has 24 Patthana meanings of the main building (source: Department for the promotion and propagation of the Sasana, Ministry of Religion Affairs and Culture).

Its symbolic role is reinforced by its location within the Kaba Aye religious complex and its association with the World Buddhist University. The library was not designed as a detached archive but as part of a larger sacred and scholarly environment (Ministry of Local Planning and Religion affairs, Burma, 1965). This setting linked the building to broader projects of Buddhist revival, education, and international religious representation in post-independence Burma.

The circular form of the main repository also carries symbolic meaning, even if not all interpretations can be proven equally. The sources clearly support the importance of centrality, radial order, and hierarchy in the design (Ngwe, 1978; Ministry of Local Planning and Religion affairs, Burma, 1965; Bansal, 2017). Bansal (2017) further notes Polk's symbolic use of the numbers three and four, the stupa-like radial ordering of the plan, and the presence of large lotus forms at the entrance. These elements suggest that the building's geometry was intended to communicate Buddhist concepts through spatial arrangement rather than through excessive applied ornament.

The study found that Buddhist symbolic ideas were intentionally integrated into the architectural form of the Tripitaka Library. The number of windows and the floral form at the top of the main building's roof were designed based on the 24-Paccaya concept in Buddhist thought, symbolizing interconnectedness and protection. In addition, the three floors of the main library reflect the "Three Refuges" in Buddhism. These symbolic elements were incorporated not only for religious meaning, but also as spiritual protection against evil, destruction, and disasters.

The museum adds another important layer of Buddhist meaning by presenting Buddhism as both national heritage and international civilisation. By displaying objects from Burma and many other Buddhist countries, the museum allowed the complex to represent Burma as a guardian and participant in a wider Buddhist world (Ministry of Local Planning and Religion affairs, Burma, 1965). This function was particularly important in the post-independence period, when cultural and religious leadership were closely tied to national identity.

The reflecting pool also contributes to the symbolic atmosphere of the ensemble. Although described in the documents as a device to reduce visual heaviness, it simultaneously produces calmness, clarity, and reflective depth, qualities that resonate strongly with Buddhist aesthetic and spiritual values (Ministry of Local Planning and Religion affairs, Burma, 1965). Because the source itself compares this strategy to earlier Burmese architectural precedents, the pool can be understood not only as a compositional device but also as part of a broader language of sacred ambience.

Taken together, these features show that Buddhist symbolism in the Tripitaka Library operates through institutional purpose, spatial hierarchy, geometry, and visual composition. The building does not rely primarily on ornament to convey meaning. Instead, it translates religious values into architectural order, controlled access, preservation, and the careful staging of sacred knowledge. For this reason, the Tripitaka Library stands as an important example of how modern architecture in post-independence Burma was expressed to embody both Buddhist identity and national cultural aspiration (Ngwe, 1978; Ministry of Local Planning and Religion affairs, Burma, 1965; Bansal, 2017).

4. Discussion

4.1 Interpretation of Architectural Modernism in the Tripitaka Library

The Tripitaka Library demonstrates how modern architecture expressed religious meaning and national identity in post-independence Myanmar. Although the building employs reinforced concrete, structural systems, and modern spatial organisation, these elements are not purely functional. Instead, they are reinterpreted through symbolic forms and spatial hierarchy. Studies on modern architecture in Myanmar suggest that post-independence architectural production was not a direct reproduction of Western modernism, but rather a localized form shaped by political transformation, climatic responsiveness, local materials, and cultural expression (Thitsar, 2018).

The circular plan of the central repository, the vertical organisation of knowledge spaces, and the integration of water features indicate a deliberate translation of Buddhist cosmological ideas into architectural form. The building therefore represents a synthesis of modern engineering and religious symbolism.

Furthermore, the project reflects the ideological vision of U Nu, in which Buddhism became central to national identity. The building functions not only as a repository of texts but also as a cultural and intellectual institution, preserving heritage and presenting it to an international audience. In this sense, architecture operates as a medium of political and cultural expression.

4.2 Comparison with Other Post-Independence Architecture in Asia

(1) Independence Memorial Hall, Sri Lanka (1953)

The Independence Memorial Hall was constructed to commemorate Sri Lanka's independence from British colonial rule. It serves as a ceremonial space and a national monument, symbolising political sovereignty.

Architecturally, the building combines modern construction techniques with traditional Kandyan forms, particularly the royal audience hall. This reflects a broader post-colonial strategy of integrating historical references into modern architecture to reinforce national identity. Similar to the Tripitaka Library, the building functions as both a symbolic and political structure, representing unity and cultural continuity.

(2) National Mosque of Malaysia (1965)

The National Mosque of Malaysia illustrates how modern architecture was used to express religious identity within a modern nation-state. The building employs reinforced concrete and modern geometric forms while incorporating Islamic symbolic elements.

This reflects a wider regional trend in which modern architecture is adapted to local religious and cultural contexts. The mosque, like the Tripitaka Library, functions as a national religious landmark, demonstrating how architecture can mediate between modernisation and tradition. The rise of religious consciousness in post-independence Malaysia further supports this interpretation.

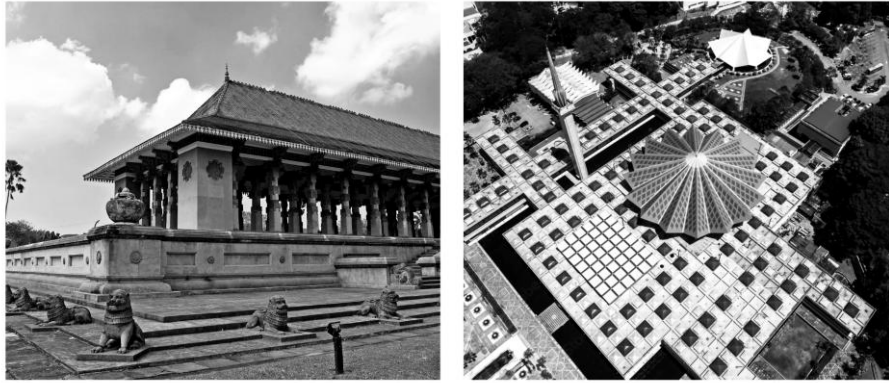


Figure 4.2.1 Independence Hall, Sri Lanka,2009 & Masjid Negara,Malaysia,2025.
(Source: Wikipedia)

(3) Mahā Pāsāṇa Guha (Myanmar, 1952)

The Mahā Pāsāṇa Guha, constructed as part of the Sixth Buddhist Synod, provides a direct contextual comparison. Located within the same complex, it represents the integration of architecture, religion, and state politics. The structure recreates an ancient Buddhist cave form using modern construction techniques, demonstrating a deliberate reference to historical tradition. Together with the Tripitaka Library, it forms part of a broader architectural project aimed at reinforcing Buddhist identity and national legitimacy.

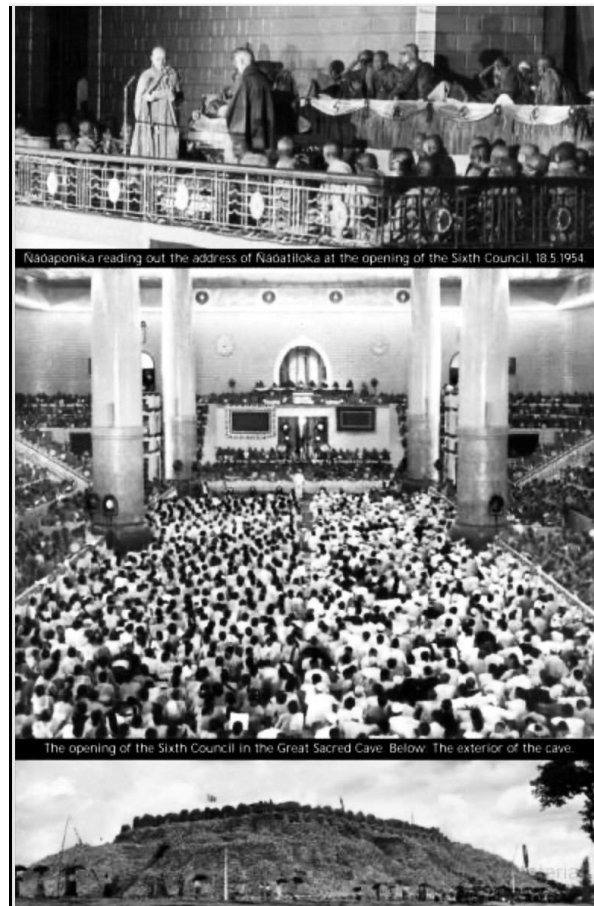


Figure 4.2.2 Mahā Pāsāṇa Guha in the early days, 1954 (source: *The Life of Nyanatiloka Thera: The Biography of a Western Buddhist Pioneer* (Nyanatiloka Thera et al., 2008, p. 157)).

Comparative Analysis

Across these three cases, several shared characteristics can be identified:

- Modernist design: use of being Truth to Materials via reinforced concrete etc;
- Regional adaptation: incorporation of local religious and cultural symbolism
- Political symbolism: architecture as a representation of independence and national identity

These examples demonstrate that post-independence architecture in Southeast Asia is characterised by the hybridisation of global modernism and local traditions, shaped by both political and cultural objectives.

4.3 Strengths and Limitations of the Study

This study provides a detailed architectural analysis of the Tripitaka Library, integrating archival research with spatial and formal interpretation. It contributes to the limited scholarship on post-independence architecture in Myanmar and situates the case within a broader Southeast Asian context. The Tripitaka Library also reflects broader regional patterns identified by Abdullah and Kim (2022), who note that post-war architecture across Southeast Asia frequently served as a structure for nation-building, cultural representation, and political legitimacy. Similar processes can be observed in Burma, where architecture became a mechanism through which the state articulated both modernisation and Buddhist national identity.

However, the study is limited by restricted access to archival documentation and original design materials. The focus on a single case study also limits the scope of comparison and generalisation.

4.4 Implications for Southeast Asian Architectural History

The findings contribute to the understanding of post-colonial modernism in Southeast Asia by demonstrating that modern architecture was actively modified rather than simply adopted. The study highlights the central role of religion in architectural modernisation, particularly in shaping national identity.

In addition, the involvement of international architects such as Benjamin Polk reveals the complexity of architectural production during the Cold War period. These collaborations often resulted in hybrid forms that reflect both global and local influences.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Summary of Key Findings

This study demonstrates that the Tripitaka Library represents a hybrid architectural form in which modernist design is combined with Buddhist symbolism. The building illustrates how architecture was used as a tool for nation-building in post-independence Myanmar.

The case of the Tripitaka Library shows that architecture in post-colonial contexts functions as both political and cultural expression. It reflects a process of hybridisation in which global modernism is accustomed to local traditions and religious meanings.

Future researchers should expand comparative studies of religious modernism across Southeast Asia. Further investigation into the works of Benjamin Polk would provide deeper insight into an international architectural practice. Additionally, systematic documentation of post-independence buildings in Myanmar is necessary to support further scholarship.

5.2 Fulfillment of Research Objectives and Hypothesis

These findings directly support the study's primary hypothesis: that post-independence Burmese architecture under U Nu was not a mere copy of Western styles, but a hybrid work resulting from the intersection of political-religious aspirations and international professional practices. The physical and spatial fabric of the Tripitaka Library confirms that the state utilized modernist architecture as a tool to project both a progressive, newly independent national identity and a revival of traditional Buddhism.

5.3 Contribution to Existing Literature and Journal Scope

This research expands the regional historiography of contemporary ASEAN architecture by focusing on the unique architectural dynamics of the Sixth Buddhist Synod era rather than generalised post-colonial Southeast Asian urbanism. It offers a very thorough historical case study that enhances current scholarly discussions about post-colonial architectural identity, tropical modernism, and the cross-cultural transfer of architectural knowledge in the South East Asia within the context of current affairs in architecture and urbanism. Additionally, it closes a significant empirical gap by bringing early architectural modernisation in Myanmar back to the interest of academics. This may be expanded upon in future studies to assess more institutional structures from this time period and better map the diverse architectural heritage of mid-century Burma.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author(s) report no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data and research materials used in this study were collected from archival sources, published literature, and institutional records related to the Tripitaka Library. Materials are available from the author upon reasonable request.

Institutional Review Board Statement

Not applicable.

CRedit Author Statement

Lwin Myat Swe: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Resources, Data Curation, Writing - original draft, Visualization. Chomchon Fusinpaiboon: Conceptualization, Methodology, Supervision, Project administration, Writing - review & editing

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