



Sunset over the temples of Bagan

THE **SANDBOX** BLOG

Myanmar

An escape from New York is a regular fantasy of mine, but one that's usually displaced by a thousand projects that seem to need constant attention. "Seem" being the operative word.

This is much clearer after my return to New York from Myanmar (Burma). I was traveling with my dad exploring the country and then spending some time working at a small boarding school for street kids in the Shan State near the border of Thailand and Laos. The trip had several goals: father-son odyssey, exploring a new place and culture, and providing a helping hand to a local project. While all of this was accomplished, in some ways it was all trumped by *just going* and encountering people and purpose along the way.



Yangon, looking down from the iconic Shwedagon Pagoda.



Spontaneous sweeping brigade keeps the temple spotless.

Our trip took us from the former capital Yangon (aka Rangoon) up an old narrow-gauge railway to Bagan, a vast surreal desert landscape dotted with 100's of long-abandoned historic temples. We proceeded by riverboat up to Mandalay, a bustling city known as the cultural capital of Burma. What a mysterious, gorgeous place. Colors, textures, sounds, smells. It felt so good to be challenged at a deep level by a whole new way of being and seeing that goes back to the beginning of time. Since some of you asked: while we were practically next door to some of the recent **violent conflict** we did not experience it directly.



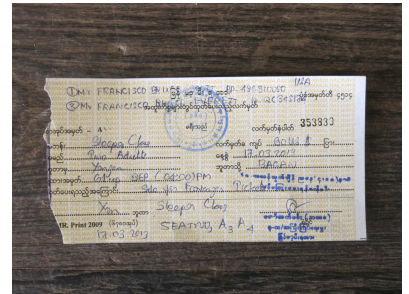
Bespoke tailoring or breakfast on streets of Yangon



Myanmar Railway: "Not as bad as they say... Not as good as you hoped" (local wisdom) ...but great fast food from the windows.



Old-school ticketing - longhand and rubber stamps



Rice fields with oxen and wooden plows circa 3000 BC. Why do I find this so inspiring? Maybe because I don't have to do it.



Dad in dining car.



"Teak Bridge" built by British over 100 years ago. A social magnet, just like our Brooklyn Bridge Promenade, but without railings.



Local dudes on the teak bridge boardwalk - demonstrating how cool it can be to wear the "longyi"



teak bridge: over 100 yrs exposure & still going strong



My dad succedes and buys his first longyi



Stonecarving district, Mandalay



Tachileik Hill School



Tachileik bridge to Thailand



Portraits were a favorite pastime and kept me busy

(right click to enlarge pictures)

Meeting the kids for the first time. Kim-Te shakes my dad's hand.

Family dinner means at least 20 people.

Tachileik was our destination after our first week of wandering, a small dusty town located in the eastern Shan State and a "restricted area" due to longstanding conflicts between the military government and the Shan tribal peoples. We were not able to travel overland through this region, and once arrived by plane were restricted to several "government approved" guest houses and specific locations. We were there to visit, encourage and work with Tachileik Hill School, a small Christian boarding school for street kids founded and operated by a young Burmese couple Lian Pu and Lian No, originally from the Chin State on the west side of the country. My father had been supporting the school for several years but this was his first visit.

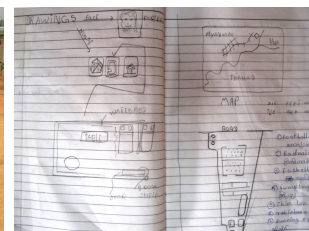


7am classes - English, geometry, geography, drawing...

I finally get my hands on some bamboo.



My dad and I are both teachers so 7am every morning found us in the one-room schoolhouse up in front of 18 resident children and a handful of others from the neighborhood (ages 6 - 13 years old). English was a core subject, so with this platform we taught: drawing, geometry, geography, architecture, games and sports, letter-writing, dog training, and a smattering of fun and useful subjects. Geometry, for instance, was used to create a badminton court, drawing to help design a new playground.



Geometry lesson = badminton court.

Architectural site-planning for beginners.

Letter writing.

One of our goals was to help the founders Lian Pu and Lian No clarify their vision for a sustainable future of the school. We used a Pilot Projects' visioning session to explore the kind of growth, development and "business model" they wanted to see. What would long term success look like? Answers: Children's health, good grades, integration into the community, good jobs, restored families, permanent location/property... We then worked together to define some strategies and tactics to get there. No easy answers, but some useful steps identified: network with local funding sources, families, churches, schools, articulate value of program to government to receive government support. limit growth of student body until basic conditions can be met.





Lian Pu and Lian No. (And Lian No still smiling after cooking for 20 people on this open fire.)



Conducting a visioning session across language and culture barriers was humbling and inspiring, but I'm more confident than ever that taking time to articulate a vision is important. Perhaps especially in the midst of urgent demands, like preparing the next meal for 18 kids over an open fire, or a leaky thatch roof in the face of an approaching rainy season.

Concrete Needs

We were also able to work on some of the school's immediate needs, thanks in part to the support of some of you:

The water situation was rather dismal. An open concrete tank draining onto a muddy ditch serving as a wash-up area for all purposes; far from convenient or hygienic. We got all hands on deck and relocated the tank, mixed and poured a new concrete slab with a drain, and installed an elevated water tank with new pipes, valves sink etc. Running water! No mud!



The kitchen area needed some work. Lots of puddles and mud.



Preparations for new concrete slab



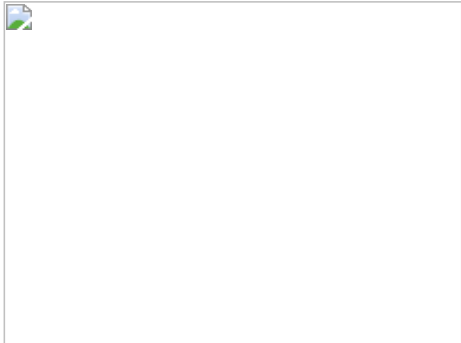
Slab sloped to new drain



Signed on behalf of the home country

We moved the old water tank

...and created a new concrete slab for the area



New water tank and plumbing installed

Working with some of the older boys I did get to work with bamboo after all (remember my last update?) With fifteen bamboo poles harvested from nearby land we constructed a climbing playground. It's basic, but wow, the response was more than enthusiastic. This got the award for most popular project, heads down and hands up!



Building a bamboo play structure was a highlight of mine, and the kids.



We completed the design and calculations for a new roof and believe we can have this done before the rains come in mid May. Let us know if you want to help. (Small contributions go a long way.)

All of these hands-on building projects reconnected me with my upbringing where DIY resourcefulness was a family tradition. I have my dad and mom to thank for an environment where we were taught (and empowered) to invent and build whatever was needed - even with limited resources. Increasingly I see this as a cornerstone of the Pilot Projects mission where *getting things done* is just as important as wonderful plans - a worthy and challenging balance to strike.

Thanks to all of you who encouraged and supported this small project. I'm sure that my dad and I benefited as much as anyone, but on behalf of the kids I can say with confidence that showing up with good will and useful skills can make a big difference in peoples lives. I can't wait to go back.



Running water and a new sink



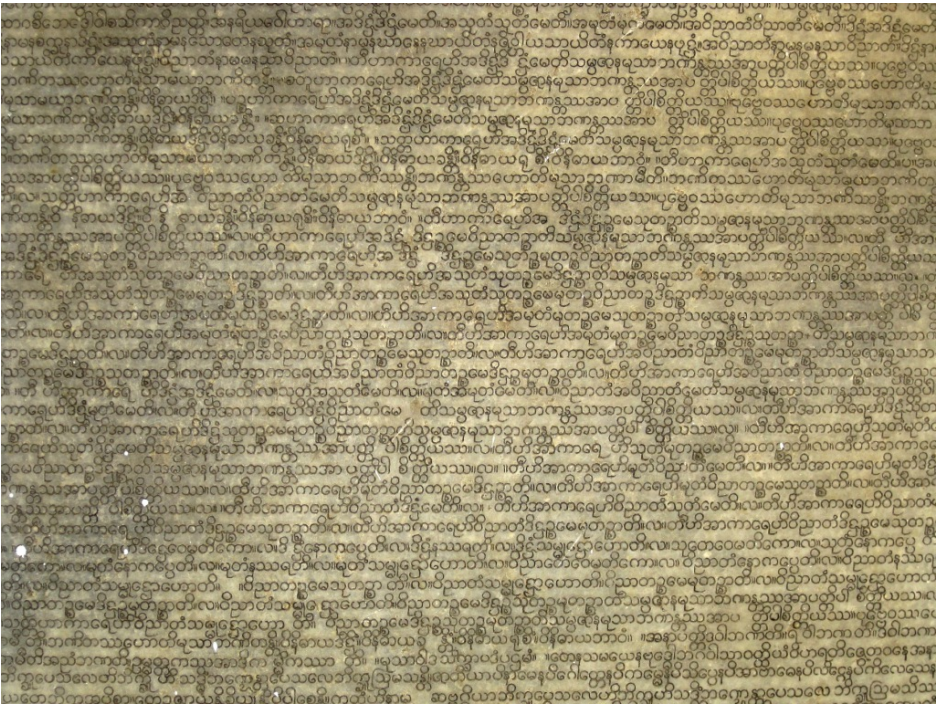
Playing house



Bruce is presented with a traditional Chin tribal garment by Lian No at a Sunday service.



200 lb ice block delivery, by older lady on bike.



Myanmar script carved in gravestone.



One of our many train station stops.

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