

# Myanmar (Burma) & Thailand

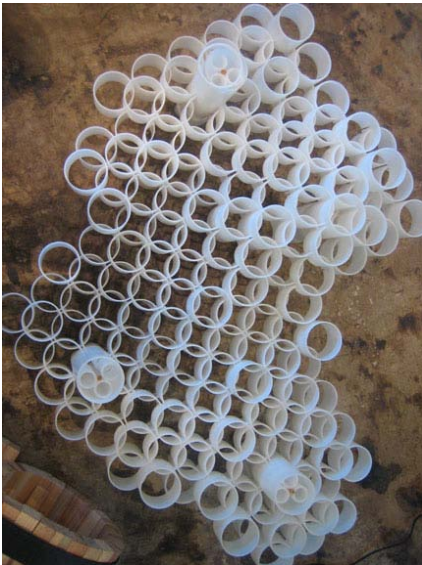
Spring, 2011 My trip began in Bangkok, Thailand, where I met with some local reuse designers...



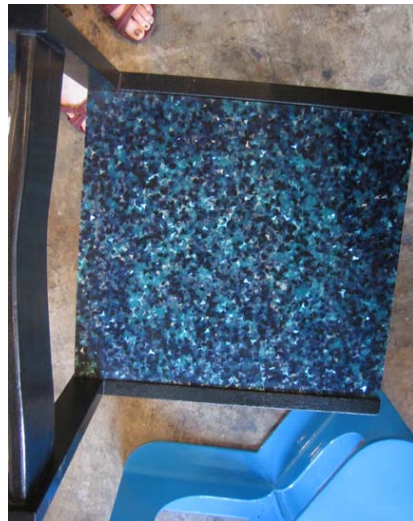
Designer and actor Top Pipat runs Bangkok's most eclectic ecoshop, appropriately named [EcoShop](#), which he started to help give local designers a venue for selling their work.



Thai reuse designer Singh Intrachooto, of [OSISU](#), and Lebanese waste management expert Ziad Abichaker, of [Cedar Environmental](#), discuss reuse composites at Singh's [Scrap Lab](#) at Kasetsart University, in Bangkok.



Scrap Lab experiments: transforming tape tubes (cores) into a table and a chair.



Button mill scrap composite makes created a hard, marble-like building material.



Singh Intrachooto's [Scrap Lab](#) is a university program that trains students to create functional works with common industrial discards. Companies hire the lab to create marketable products with their discards. Intrachooto also establishes reuse artisan groups around Thailand, helping them develop new reuse crafts for income generation. Singh is really on to something with his work, I hope this model is replicated in other parts of the world.



I found a store called Reflections, in Siam Bangkok. The designs were good, mostly using rice and seed sacks. The designers have also used some cheap fabrics to attach the rice sacks, which seem to fall apart quickly. This is the true challenge of reuse design...how to make something that doesn't produce more garbage than it attempted to prevent.



Reflections features a large stuffed animal couch.

# Myanmar

I immediately noticed that Myanmar produces less garbage than Thailand. Tourism and a stronger economy have encouraged extensive use of disposable plastic containers in Thailand. In Myanmar, plastic is a commodity. A cab driver in Mandalay told me that the Burmese government banned the mixing of fibers with plastic because it spoiled the recyclability of the plastic, and they had suffered plastic shortages in the past. And various recyclers told me that plastics are not exported to neighboring countries India or China (which receive much of the world's recyclables) but, rather, that all recycling is processed domestically. This is something I would like to learn more about.



Informal recyclers are called 'Plastic Kautema' in Myanmar, even if they recycle more than just plastic. Unlike many parts of the world, people who recycle for a living in Myanmar are not looked down upon. In fact, it is common for young kids to collect cans during their school breaks and sell them to the neighborhood recyclables buyers



Recycling stations are ubiquitous in Myanmar. Run by small families or groups of people, the stations are simply places where people can sell their recyclable material. They then bale the materials and resell them to someone who chips and processes the material for recycling. These boys, on break from school, compact plastic and metal with a hammer. Baling machinery is uncommon, I was told. Recycling stations in Yangon were buying materials for the following prices (and reselling for double). They sell in ever-fluctuating black market Kyat currency, so I converted to USD:

30cents for 1 kilo of paper  
1 cent per plastic bottle  
.5 cent per metal can



Left: Unloading paper at a local recyclery.



This friendly Plastic Kautema, in front of his home in Hsipaw, spoke a little English.



At a recycling depot in Bagan.



Reuse is more common than recycling. Refilling plastic water bottles.



Plastic Kautema pushcart



The Burmese government has illegalized non-recyclable plastic bags in Yangon, Mandalay and Bagan. Curiously, these signs in Mandalay were only in English. The laws are enforced, though-- at least in Yangon, where a woman was jailed for 15 days after using a plastic bag that was non-recyclable.



Plastic is a problem. With little waste management, most towns have created informal dumps, usually near water, which are periodically burned.



People burn their own waste outside their homes. In towns like Hsipaw, the air is filled with smoke. Burning plastic is a serious health concern about which people are largely unaware.

The creek stops here: excessive waste leads to stagnant water, a breeding ground for bacteria and mosquito larva.



Fortunately, Myanmar has a strong tradition of reuse and waste prevention. Public water tanks, like these at Shwedagon Paya in Yangon, offer an attached reusable cup.

It is quite common to see people playing games with bottlecaps, especially in Yangon.



Left: A bottlecap floor is nicer than dirt at a restaurant near Bagan.

Right: Rice sacks make for a comfy baby cradle, in Namsan.





Cardboard hats shade these men as they pump water from Inya Lake, in Yangon, for the annual water festival.



"Bakery Fat" can turned watering can, in Hsipaw.

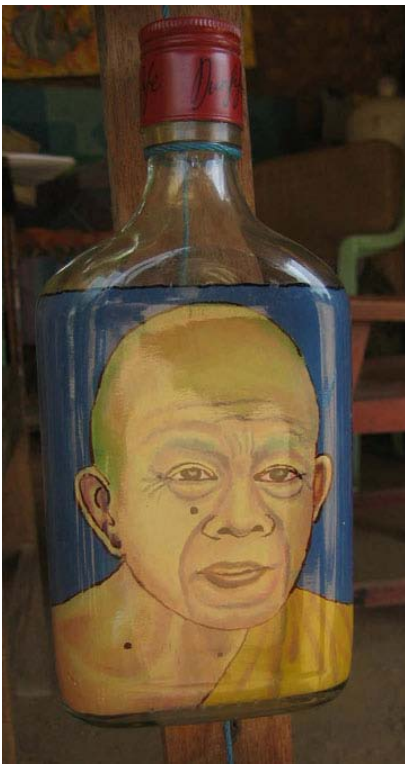


Left: Oil cans and plastic containers are transformed into dust pans all over the country.

Right: Glass bottles are reused as lamps.



Left: One of our hotels had reusable soap jars. I also saw this at an eco lodge in Thailand.



Painted Bottles:  
one of the only  
examples of non-  
functional reuse art  
I found in  
Myanmar. These  
bottles were  
painted on the  
inside by Bagan  
artist Yaw Naw  
Than, who bends  
his paintbrush at a  
90 degree angle to  
paint these. Pretty  
amazing.



Transforming used  
tires into buckets  
and shoes is  
common in  
Myanmar and  
Thailand. This man  
cuts the tires with a  
tool he adapted from  
an old saw. Most of  
the well buckets in  
Hsipaw are made  
from old tires.





This is actually a photo from Thailand. The garbage cans on the streets are made from old tires. In Myanmar, the garbage cans are mostly woven bamboo baskets. This can was in Kanchanaburi, Thailand



Myanmar is filled with pedal powered tools, like this grinder. Most sewing machines are pedal powered, and thus not affected by frequent power outages.



Crafts: I found a young woman in Namsan making interesting crafts with ribbon. We swapped a few techniques and I shared some ideas about using reused materials instead of ribbon, which is hard to find in rural Myanmar.



Near the end of my trip, I gave a couple of reuse workshops. One at the American Center and another, here, at the New Zero Art Space, in Yangon. There was a lot of interest and a good turn out despite it being a holiday. The best part about the workshop was that I had asked participants to bring in their own reuse works and ideas. In the process of sharing, we swapped some ideas for improving techniques and preparing materials more quickly.



Stella, creator of the Yangon NGO Noble Mind Civil Group, brought in bags she had made from plastic wrappers, and purses she was weaving with plastic bags.



One of my favorite reuse ideas of all time. This is an abacus created by the Yangon NGO Hantha. They made educational materials for kids. This is made from cardboard and rolled paper. Brilliant.



Left: Pyin ya Panchan brought in her book art to share with the group.

Below: Artists and NGO workers share ideas.



## Final Thoughts

I was impressed with all that is being reused and recycled in Myanmar. It is both a blessing and a curse for countries like Myanmar to have such high poverty rates and slow development. The benefit of their delayed development is that they don't yet have the financial resources to flood their markets and environment with disposable materials. But with increased imports from China, and a fast growing tourism industry, I suspect this will soon change. The challenge is to establish a waste management infrastructure that can grow alongside the local economy. Despite the amount of open dumping and incineration happening in Myanmar, it does seem that the government is making some good choices in banning plastic bags and non-recyclable plastic composites. Still, education is badly needed. Like most places in the world, informal recyclers in Myanmar don't make a lot of money. In many countries, waste collectors organize into cooperatives because selling larger quantities of materials yields a better rate. This is also true in Myanmar, but the political situation prevents people from organizing.

I would love to see countries like Myanmar showing pride for many of their reuse traditions. They still practice many of the habits that people in the US are now trying to re-adopt, such as toting reusable containers for takeaway food. Economic development has a significant impact on a country's waste stream. In Southern Thailand, a world hot spot for tourism, municipalities have been unable to appropriately handle the influx of waste being produced, resulting in a garbage island of poorly managed waste. As a tourist, this is something I spend a lot of time considering during my travels. Tourists generally create more daily waste than the average local resident. Should tourists be taxed for this impact? Should tourism companies be taxed? Should producers ultimately be responsible? Can we leave it up to the local government and private waste firms? Or is it up to us to turn our waste into a resource? Please feel free to contact me with your ideas.

Happy trails,

Taylor Cass Stevenson  
 livedebris@gmail.com  
 Spring, 2011