NEW SKYSCRAPERS IN MEGACITIES ON A WARMING GLOBE
Bangalore: Dysfunctional Boom Town
by RAHUL MEHROTRA

Since the late 1970s, after an influx of information technology workers, capital, and companies, the population of Bangalore has increased at least five-fold to over six million, making it India’s fifth-largest metropolitan area. Yet Bangalore’s physical development has been quite unlike that of other rapidly expanding Eastern cities (like Singapore, Dubai, and Shanghai) that remake themselves in a predictably futuristic image after the arrival of global capital. Instead Bangalore has resisted this usual restructuring process and derives its global image largely form its internal private environments: IT campuses, shopping malls, and luxury hotels. Its public image shows a city functioning within the benign disorder of democracy and within cultural traditions adverse to ostentation. In fact, the city’s emergent urban fabric is closer in its fragmentation, disjunction, and sprawl to that of Los Angeles or of Asian cities (such as Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok, etc.) that have grown incrementally.

The thirty-year upheaval in Bangalore has been both beneficial and destructive. In the days of English colonialism, Bangalore was a station or cantonment (as it was referred to in Colonial India) for British troops and had a slow-paced civility. Beginning in the 1930s with the construction of numerous parks and English-style bungalows (often on one-acre plots), it became known as the Garden City. Blessed with a near perfect climate, it later became a popular retirement town. Bangalore (now being renamed its preanglicized appellation Bengaluru) has long been a center of learning, with particularly strong education in science, mathematics, and technology. This fact, along with its great weather and good location, attracted technology institutes and industries starting in the 1940s. More recently, starting in the 1970s, the information technology enterprise has grown out of this tradition. In 1985 Wipro, a large company first making computer hardware, then software, and run by Azim Premji from Bombay, set up its headquarters in Bangalore, triggering a clustering of IT and related industries.

Early IT big-box work facilities were built in the old city of Bangalore and initiated a demolition of the old buildings that by the 1990s became total: Only a handful of old civic buildings were spared; all the old bungalows were demolished, their residents often migrating to other ex-colonial countries like Australia. When the center had filled up with multi-story residential and commercial structures, building moved to the periphery in a form much like that of American “edge cities,” with residences separated from retail and workplaces, and even with gated communities of single-family detached houses vaguely meant to evoke nostalgia for Bangalore’s demolished bungalows. The poor, formerly segregated out of sight (either in the old native town at a distance from the cantonment or securely accommodated in the servants’ houses of bungalow compounds), now live primarily in self-constructed slum dwellings interwoven and in sight among commercial and enclosed residential zones.

Today Bangalore’s most desperate environmental need is for well-functioning infrastructure. Roads in particular are often gridlocked and potholed, and public transportation almost nonexistent. While only twelve kilometers, the trip from the airport to Electronic City (a 140-acre IT park developed in 1988) normally takes about three hours. Electrical supply can be unreliable. (Azim Premji has often threatened to move Wipro from Bengaluru unless the problem of roads and electricity are fully addressed.) Water and sewer systems are inadequate to conveniently serve the needs of many of the new poor residents, who are not provided public housing. Yet the city’s per capita annual income (US$6,460; Wikipedia) is the highest for any Indian City!

The impasse blocking progress is political. In the last government of the state of Karnataka, chief minister S. M. Krishna supported the Bangalore Action Task Force (BATF), which was set up and funded by IT companies including Infosys. BATF, partnering with the government, put up public toilets, signage, and bus stops and lobbied for parks, other basic public infrastructure, and master-planning for the region. But in the last elections, Krishna, whose position was the only one with real power in Bangalore, was roundly defeated: Rural constituents
had thought that Bangalore was being pampered. The Task Force was terminated. Bangalore’s IT elite and its political elite are deadlocked in a now dual city of a stagnating center and a booming periphery. In this condition, the Bangalore Development Authority, responsible for visioning and planning, is often reduced to engaging in crisis management to keep the city going. Given the lack of regional planning orchestration, the center will emerge as the main location for entertainment, pubs, clubs, and restaurants for the better off and now dispersed Bangaloreans. The center will implode while the periphery explodes.

Bangalore’s wealthy and its poor have benefited, overall, from its rapid growth. Work opportunities are plentiful. Its middle class, most affected by poor transportation options and other malfunctioning infrastructure, have benefited much less. Yet they retain a strong work ethic and sense of moral propriety that makes them reluctant to participate in informal economies and supply mechanisms. For the middle class, the city is truly dysfunctional.

Bangalore’s IT industry and call centers have rightly been said to form a “Coolie City.” Creative work and leadership is still coming from places like America’s Silicone Valley. In a “flat world,” this could change. If it did, there might be opportunities for civic pride to again motivate the production of attractive public places and architecture. For now, Bangalore overwhelmingly conveys a kind of Gold Rush transience, and its commercial architecture is the bare-bones functionalism of leased big boxes. Because building must be very rapid, Bangalore has substituted metal siding and curtain glazing for India’s predominant labor-intensive wet construction involving masonry and reinforced concrete. Only hotels, temples, and temporary festival constructions seem to receive any real design attention.

A physically improved Bangalore will depend on the collaboration of its IT and institutional elite with its political elite. Without this, peripheral communities might secede and form their own independent towns, creating a galaxy of enclaves ringing the old core. Ideally, through the welding together of a clear metropolitan entity, a strong tax income of the periphery could be made available to support the center and overall infrastructure. However, as long as the development in the region is imbalanced and political compulsions for investments lie elsewhere in the state, Bangalore runs the danger of buckling under its own success. Any hope for progressive and sustainable change is based on the youthfulness of the IT community and its drive to succeed.
The Vidhana Soudha or State Government offices and State Assembly building is an eclectic mix of Dravidian, Chola, and Kannada regional styles developed under former ruling dynasties. The building employs stone (local grey granite) as its primary building material and is embellished with Indian motifs and floral patterns. Built between 1952 and 1957 by the Public Works department of Karnataka, the building exemplifies the divide between regional political aspirations and the modernity of the institutions and industrial enterprises that built contemporary Bangalore. This schism between the aspirations and compulsions of the political elite and those of the industrial elite is the root of the lack of physical improvement in Bangalore.

Photo, Clay Kelton/ from M. N. Srinivas, Bangalore: Scenes from an Indian City (Bangalore: Gangarams, 1994).

A colonial bungalow being torn down, probably to replaced with a multistory apartment or office building. The old doors and windows are being sold to be recycled for their wood. The disappearance of the past in Bangalore has been rapid. Unlike numerous other cities in India, Bangalore does not have any legislative measures to protect its heritage buildings. Photo, Clare Arni
Construction manual labor carried out by female migrant workers. Men do the skilled labor. Hard manual labor has long been a part of poor Indian women's lives as a means to supplement family income. Photo: Fernando Molerés/Paros

A breakdown of infrastructure. Women line up to wait, perhaps for two or three hours, to get water from a water tanker truck. The nearby glass pyramid is probably part of an IT park, to the left of which is a raised security platform to secure the campus. The IT area probably has green lawns consuming more water everyday than all the women can collect for their basic needs. Photo: Heidar Netocracy/Paros
Bangalore, 2003. A typical campus-style development for an information technology company on the periphery of Bangalore. Self-sufficient in water supply and electricity, these campuses create enclaves of surrogate environments far removed from the larger city and region. They communicate with the outside world through virtual, not physical, contacts. An American entrepreneur who visited these campuses for business remarked, "Doing business in Bangalore is cool; I am in the 21st century at the IT campus and then get to visit the 18th century on the drive back to the airport." Photo, Christopher Anderson/Magnum

Bangalore, 2003. A typical big-box, artificially lit calling center. In the middle of the night, many callers are talking with Americans about their credit card bills. For the young workers, assuming Americanized "professional" identities in their telephone conversations, their coworkers make up their primary community during any work breaks. Photo, Christopher Anderson/Magnum
Bangalore, 2003. New gated communities at the edge of the city. The growing popularity of these “Bungalow Style” developments is determining the form of Bangalore: dispersed enclaves connected by private transportation. The residents of these enclaves are often employees in the adjoining technology parks or are non-resident Indians investing in a second home. Predictable infrastructure and services (water and electricity) as well as safety drive the popularity of these enclaves. Photo, Christopher Anderson / Magnum

The Oberon Hotel in Bangalore, which evokes the Garden City image through its design and integration of green. Hotels (aside from the IT industry) are the most lucrative business in booming Bangalore; rooms are scarce and expensive. Copyright, 2007, Travel Sense ASTA
The Temple of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness. The resurfacing of the ancient in India's city of the future! Temples such as this one, built in stone, concrete, and glazed curtain surfaces are emblematic of the emergent condition in the city of Bangalore where tradition easily embraces the modern, appropriating it to create startling hybrid types. These spaces and types are forming the new spectacles of the city. Photo, Andrea Rivetti

A shopping mall built on a downtown urban lot. Its intimate scale, like that of a hotel lobby, makes it a successful social gathering place, especially for young people for whom it's usually more pleasant than their crowded joint-family home environments. © Ajay Ojha