

Dear reader

Bangalore, India's fastest growing city, also has a thriving architectural scene, report British architects and current residents Maria Jones and Ian McDonald.



Ian McDonald, born in 1966, graduated from Strathclyde University in 1990, while Maria Jones, born in 1968, graduated from the Welsh School of Architecture in 1992. Both have worked as architects in the UK, Germany and India, and have been based in Bangalore since last year.

New buildings come in all shapes and sizes in the south Indian city of Bangalore, but most have one feature in common. They invariably boast a brightly painted terracotta devil's head, perched on a ledge or perimeter wall, facing outward. The reason for this leering gargoyle? To ward off damaging thoughts of jealousy emanating from passers-by.

Often there is much to be jealous of, at least in material terms. Despite the poverty prevalent all over the subcontinent, it is an oft-repeated truism that India has an enormous middle class and nowhere is it more visible than here. Modern Bangalore's ambition is to be the Silicon Valley of India. Over the past decade it has lured many high-tech multinationals, such as Texas Instruments, Hewlett Packard, Sony and Siemens. With them come headquarters and office complexes, and Bangalore architects have capitalised on the boom.

Part of the attraction for such companies lies in Bangalore's past. This was once the 'garden city' of the south, endowed with splendid parks by its medieval Muslim rulers and the imperial British. The latter ensured Bangalore its basic layout of straight streets punctuated by parade grounds, whitewashed churches and civic edifices in a classical style adhered to even after independence.

Central government has helped with Bangalore's recent development, funding research and educational institutes on a scale that would give most western governments a coronary. Bangalore boasts Doshi's influential southern outpost of the Indian Institute of Management, as well as the stunningly landscaped Jawaharlal Nehru Centre for Advanced Scientific Research by Charles Correa. Many schemes are by the city's oldest practice, Chandavarkar & Thacker, whose work at the Indian Institute of Science and the JNC complex admirably suit Bangalore's leafy 'campus' layout.

Such projects provide a wide variety of work, from libraries and lab blocks to recreation complexes and guesthouses – the kind of large-scale, new-build work most British practices would kill for.

Bangalore thus benefits from a lively architectural scene; it is widely acknowledged that some of India's best young designers live and work here. Unfortunately, much that is bad also finds its way through. There are some jarring contrasts along the main thoroughfare, Mahatma Gandhi Road, as crass new retail and office blocks sprout up next to venerable Edwardian institutions such as Higginbotham's Bookshop. In the field of private residences, imaginations can run wilder. Here Indian architect Gautam Bhatia's despairing label 'Punjabi baroque' can seem an understatement, as the nouveau riches compete with hectares of slithery marble, cosmetic Ionic porticoes and fake Venetian windows.

What of the future? Success brings its own problems (overcrowding, traffic, pollution), all conspiring to tarnish Bangalore's garden city image. People moan about poor infrastructure, power cuts and inadequate public transport system. Southern neighbour Hyderabad has just pulled off a spectacular coup by enticing Microsoft to locate its Indian base there. Bangalore tries to shrug off the loss, but residents of 'Cyberabad' are jubilant.

So can India's sixth largest, and fastest-growing, metropolis retain its famous 'Bangallure'? Only time will tell, but for now the city's laid-back and relatively cosmopolitan atmosphere still wins out over its neighbours. Local potters need not fear a slump in the terracotta devil market.

Maria Jones *Ian McDonald*

Recent work by Chandavarkar & Thacker at Bangalore's Indian Institute of Science include the Jawahar Guest House (exterior, far right) and the Ladies' Hostel (courtyard, right).

