

A NEW ARCHITECTURE FOR ALL?

From the Consumptive to the Experiential

(Extracts from an online panel discussion hosted by RVCA on 05 May 2022)

Moderator: Edgar Demello

Panellists: Meera Iyer, M.V. Rajeev Gowda, Champaka Rajagopal, Pushpamala N., Bijoy Ramachandran

Faculty Coordinators: Salila Vanka, S. Madhuri Rao, Archana Vittal

Preface

RV College of Architecture, Bengaluru organised an online panel discussion titled 'A New Architecture for All? From the Consumptive to the Experiential' on 05 May 2022. This event was conceptualised as a discussion between experts from different disciplines on the role of cultural spaces in shaping public life in Bengaluru. This article presents transcribed excerpts of the event. The entire panel discussion can be found on [RVCA's Youtube channel](#). In a complementary exercise, the faculty coordinators also conducted an online survey addressed to several Bengaluru-based cultural institutions, with questions regarding the city's cultural terrain and public realm. Selected responses have been added in the form of pull-out quotes in this piece.

Excerpts

Edgar Demello

'The world is changing in front of our eyes. Physically and metaphorically. The old binaries have been reloaded. The predictable, cyclic patterns of the seasons have given way to climate change, political instability, a continuing pandemic and, once again, war. Narrow nationalism has replaced the heterogeneous and dynamic texture of our cities. Fear, anxiety and insecurity are the new emotions amongst the populace, not to speak of the mental health issues they lead to.

But, history has shown us that each time the planet was overtaken by crises, humankind has reimagined and reinvented ways to reconstruct a new socio-cultural reality. Be it in fields of science and technology, medicine, the social sciences and correspondingly in the fields of the arts and architecture. Architecture always positions itself as a go-between to bring together the best of both worlds. It must now reflect upon this new reality - almost through a *tabula rasa* - to invoke fresh, exciting and equitable spatial dimensions for the wellbeing of all its users. Buildings should now be designed, at least in part, for all and not for just a few. Yes, it's time for a new architectural reality, based on plurality.

Our cities have shown a very strong resilience in times of crisis; in part because, in principle, we are a culture of the outdoors. The streets and their thresholds, tree platforms, courts, verandahs and parks ... for all. In the same vein we now need to rethink a new tool-kit of building types that have a more participatory nature so that the extremes that exist in our cities are somehow mitigated. The city must belong to all. There are already early signs of this in our city with the various *habbas* and neighbourhood cultural centres organised and funded by private initiatives. These are pockets of reprieve that need to come centre stage, into the public view, so to speak. A complete existential overhaul, a radical paradigm shift must be in the making through private and public partnership for us all to experience a new relationship to public space.

The unique cosmopolitan quality of Bangalore's demography needs to be celebrated for what it is. Diverse and inclusive;

RV College of Architecture
RVCA

A MEANINGFUL ARCHITECTURE FOR ALL?

From the Consumptive to the Experiential

PANEL DISCUSSION
05 May 2022
6.00-8.00pm (IST)

PANELISTS
Bijoy Ramachandran
Architect, Hundredhands
Champaka Rajagopal
Urban Practitioner, Researcher & Educator
Meera Iyer
Convener, INTACH Bengaluru Chapter
Pushpamala N
Artist
Rajeev Gowda
Academic, Ex. Member of Parliament

MODERATOR
Edgar Demello
Architect, EDA

ZOOM DETAILS
Meeting ID: 305 090 6708
Passcode: RVCA2022
This event will also be streamed live on the RV College of Architecture Youtube Channel

This panel discussion is being organised under the aegis of RV College of Architecture's proposed academic journal **sub:version**. This online event brings together experts from different disciplines to discuss the role of cultural spaces in shaping public life in Bangalore.

Faculty Coordinators:
Salila Vanka - salilavanka.rvca@rvai.edu.in
Madhuri Rao - madhuri@rvca@rvai.edu.in
Archana Vittal - archanavittal.rvca@rvai.edu.in

Go, change the world

and architecture must become the enabler. But it is obvious that this is a role that needs more players than just architects. Architecture is, after all, an all-encompassing profession that has always needed to interface with allied disciplines.'

Meera Iyer

'What do we mean when we say an 'Architecture for All'? As one who works in the field of history and heritage, I think of how our culture and our built architectural heritage can be made more inclusive, accessible and lively. What do we mean by culture? Let me borrow a definition from ecology and adapt it to say that Culture is about the ways of living and interacting with each other and the world around us. When we think of Bangalore, you could say it is about the Spirit of the City ... An everyday experience of diversity in the city today comes in the form of the cultural differences that you can see and feel in different parts of the city. Many people have pointed out how our city has multiple centres, rather than one historic centre. Each has its own flavour. Walk around Frazer Town, Shivajinagar or Chamarajpet and you will notice each neighbourhood has a distinctive food, language, music, architecture and street life.

We all know that in India, the street is a public space. It used to be that half our lives were lived outside, on the *jagalis*, on the streets, playing, shopping, chatting. Streets as public spaces have the quality of being changeable, malleable. Anyone familiar with Ahmedabad will have experienced that malleability in Manek Chowk where a square full of jewellery shops by day becomes a buzzing food fest by night, every night. We also have similar such transformations in Bangalore. Avenue Road turns into a sea of flowers every single morning thanks to the flower market which extends halfway up the street. Avenue Road and BVK Iyengar Road both turn into street markets every Sunday morning. During the *karaga*, the densest shop-lined streets turn into communal kitchens by night. Such public spaces that lend themselves to multiple uses are characteristic of Indian cities, and Bangalore is no exception. It must be said that these malleable public spaces are usually, by their very nature, inclusive.

... Can we encourage malleability in other kinds of built heritage, especially our everyday heritage? I take the example of Ahmedabad once again where people have organised cultural events in small chowks within markets. We do have a few such examples in Bangalore, a well-known one being the *Ramnavami* festival that takes place in the grounds of Fort High School. Other built heritage that could serve as more active public spaces are the several neighbourhood markets, many of which are languishing. Can these double up as venues where communities can organise theatre, music programmes or other cultural events? Perhaps they can become craft centres where artists and craftspeople can meet and work and sell. That could lead to such synergy.'

Arakali Venkatesh

M V Rajeev Gowda

'My perspective is not of an architect per se, but of a policy maker, someone who is also a '*Mannina Maga*' (son of the soil), and a citizen of this city. So for me, when you talk about the architecture of Bengaluru, there are many architectures. There's the built architecture and there's the natural architecture which over the years we have substantially destroyed and manipulated in very negative

ways. But the whole idea is that we've got so much potential as a city. When you talk about 'All'; when you talk about cosmopolitan[ism], this is a city that has the potential to literally showcase so many diverse cultures including the local native cultures. And what has happened over the years is that we have not done that.

If you look at the way the city has emerged, the way the city has the newer built spaces, substantially on the outskirts, the IT sector are mostly closed spaces secured and inaccessible to anyone other than those who work there. So, you look at them from the outside, but you don't get to engage with it. Contrast that to what happens in the centre of the city, if you can think about a festival that we may all have participated in - *Chitra Santhe*. Once a year, the area around the golf course in Kumara Krupa Road is closed off and it is opened up to artists. It becomes a street fair, and it transforms people's engagement with art and artists and makes art so much more accessible. It allows more people to take part in that.

That is one dimension when you see Church Street as a new example of urban design in action. You see on the weekends that it becomes a space that comes alive with various kinds of artists and others. These are the visibly engaged and accessible spaces to all of us in some ways but along with that, there is a whole spectrum of architecture that we either engage with or do not ... If you go to these villages around which the city has grown - I live in Basavanagudi, there is Mavalli, there is Siddhapura, there's so many other places just right around and we drive past and we see sometimes that there is a village festival on, and you will see the bright lights and you will hear music. You need to get off the main road and into the by-lanes and then you'll discover that there are temples, processions and festivals.

... When I was in college, there used to be rock concerts at Cubbon Park which are long forgotten possibilities and it's something that could easily be revived and give more and more people an opportunity to come and participate. Instead, we have come up with an architectural idiom of parks for older people to walk in and not necessarily using or creating enough spaces for art, theatre and dance that we do indoors mainly, but which our climate would allow us to do amazingly well outdoors as well... So, as we go forward, I would say that we need to think about inclusivity in the form of different kinds of cultural expressions, festivals, people and languages and think about the architecture of the city and how to evolve it with an open inclusive mindset which then finds a way to create platforms.'

Smitha MB

Champaka Rajagopal

'Today I wish to share reflections on two types of dynamics of public architecture which claim democratic values in different cities across the world. (I am) going to speak about two specific types of architectural spaces - one is the Sacred Hearts Basilica in Paris and the second which is our own *Karaga* festival (in Bengaluru).

The story of the Sacred Hearts Basilica in Paris is one of how architecture can become representative of tensions between power structures like the monarchy and a highly conservative religious institution on the one hand, and people power on the other. In 1870, the rulers of France were defeated by Germany in the Franco Prussian War. The defeated monarchy attributed the cause of defeat to moral

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decadence among rulers. Religious institutions proposed to build the Sacred Hearts Basilica in Paris, as a symbol of repentance by the ruler. On continued neglect by the monarchy, people of Paris waged a civil war against the monarchy and the church. Located on the Montmarte (Mount Marte), the Sacred Hearts Basilica was the site from which the civilians fought against the ruling power to reclaim democracy of, by and for the people, in Paris.

Today, we are confronted in India with several examples that are counterpoints to this and similar circumstances as well. We have no dearth of examples in public discourse where public space and architecture is violently claimed by dominant groups and resisted by minority communities.

What can we as architects do? What precedence can we garner to peacefully reclaim public space as architecture for all?

The beautiful *Karaga* festival is an interesting combination of gender sensitivity in Hindu mythology and democratisation of public space in the city. The event starts at Sampangi tank, a historically important cultural space linked to water, fire and the earth. For eleven days, a man dressed as Draupadi, who is mythologically the wife of five Pandavas in the Mahabharata navigates streets, open spaces, and traditional tanks. More importantly, the long energising procession for about 11 days resurrects democratic claims to public space in a city where environmental resources are rapidly getting depleted, open spaces are becoming more and more gated and shrines on the streets have become exclusionary spaces. Scholars such as Smriti Srinivas, Janaki Nair have studied and revealed political, cultural and social histories of these dwindling public spaces of democratic claims in Bengaluru.

Like the *Karaga* festival, an equally powerful parallel from Bengaluru is the Infant Jesus congregation at the St. Mary's Basilica at Shivajinagar where people from all religions gather. This event is a great symbol of tolerance.

The problem is that as architects and designers we've so far shied away from engaging with political strategy. So, whether as *Karaga* or the Infant Jesus Church or the story of Sacred Hearts Basilica, we as architects need to do our bit to reclaim public architecture as democratic space!

Pushpamala N.

'I want to talk about the culture of protest as part of culture and to do with buildings... In 2016 the Karnataka Artists started a protest under the banner of Venkatappa Art Gallery Forum (VAG Forum), as the government wanted to more or less privatise the heritage structures in Karnataka. The Venkatappa Art Gallery built in the 1970s came into being because of artist protests as there was no place for us to exhibit modern Karnataka art or have a space which artists could rent cheaply for their activities. In 2016, with the idea of public-private partnerships, the government signed an MoU with the Tasveer Foundation, who would take over the entire space in Cubbon Park, rebuild it and rename it and put away the collections.

... The protests were very creative and interesting and they happened in different parts of Bengaluru. It was historical, because artists, cultural figures and intellectuals from all over Karnataka were joining in the protest. This went on for about six months and though the MoU was not cancelled, people advised the foundation to drop the idea and go elsewhere.

The Kochi Biennale was started with the tourism minister M.A. Baby, who invited [artists] Bose Krishnamachari and Riyas Komu to start a Biennale ... All culture comes under government tourism departments which have the most funding ... In fact, the biennales all over the world are tourist attractions - like the Venice Biennale. But art is not only about spectacular events, you know, but there also must be consistent activity and lots of things going on. One thing is that Fort Kochi is a small town, Bengaluru is a crazy city and difficult to get around. So, maybe one should not only think about Bengaluru in terms of festivals.

... Most places have become very inimical to culture. They are not interested in anything to do with either any intellectual activity or culture at all. An earlier generation of politicians might have read books, they were all writers as well. In Karnataka for instance, and in most other states as well, because they're linguistic states, but they would also be interested in art or theatre or film. Nobody knows or thinks about architecture by the way. So, when people talk about architectural spaces and buildings, I think nobody knows about the field of architecture. By nobody, I mean most of the people, or the governments today for whom architecture has become a pastiche ... There are many excellent artists in Bengaluru, but there is not much patronage over here. So, if I insist on doing things here and having shows here, it's because I live here and I want to address the community here, and it is my context.'

Bijoy Ramachandran

'I've been in Kerala for four days now, travelling through the state, looking at architecture for the IIA State awards. There is a renaissance afoot here in Kerala ... and really the thing that strikes me is that, particularly in a place like Calicut, there is patronage from the government. So, the ex-MLA, who was here for three terms and the local IIA Chapter have transformed 20 public buildings, returning them to active public use.

Regarding your question about what makes them successful - what programming, etc. - there is a wonderful school here in Calicut that Brijesh Shaijal and his wife, Nimisha have produced. It was a defunct government school with 20 kids studying there on a large three-acre site in the heart of Calicut. With the MLA's assistance, they raised around 10 crores, partly from the government corpus that the MLAs have and they've completely rejuvenated the building. They have increased their capacity; they have 700 kids now in that school. They have made public programming essential to cross-subsidize the way the school is run.

There's a very large auditorium that has been built as part of the program which is publicly accessible and given out to the city for events. In fact, we were there on site at 12 in the night after our

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Jean Christian Randrianampizafy

site visits to see the school and the ex-MLA himself came to see the building and was cleaning the mirrors and turning on the lights and there was this sense of ownership of this building and what it was doing in the city.

So, ... on the one hand, as architects we are waiting for the commission to arrive at our office but what I have seen here in Calicut is that it isn't really that kind of detached engagement with the city that these architects here have demonstrated. The group has gone out there and proposed things for a very long time and now suddenly, a lot of things are aligning for them, and they're able to engage with public work in a way that is meaningful for the city. And the city too now is engaging them with fees for work for the city and not *pro bono*, appreciating the value that architects bring to the imagination of what these buildings can do!

So, yes, I think the Bangalore International Centre (BIC) is a good example, primarily not so much for its architecture, but for two things. One is in the mechanics of how the money was raised to make that building through small donations to very large endowments from corporates. [Two], more importantly, I think once something is built and handed over, the stewardship of these public buildings is incredibly essential on how one imagines it, how one uses it and that's where the BIC has been successful even during the pandemic. So, it shows that the building is, in a way, incidental but it's the imagination of what that public forum needs to engage with and include in its programming that makes it a vital part of the city.'

Edgar Demello is a Bengaluru-based architect, teacher, curator, writer, and has been in practice since the early eighties. In 2000, he started tAG&B (the Architecture Gallery & Bookshop) which later morphed into a virtual gallery space, CoLab Art+Architecture.

Meera Iyer is a Bengaluru-based writer and independent researcher with an interest in connecting people to their histories, especially through heritage.

Prof. M.V.Rajeev Gowda served as a Member of Parliament in the Rajya Sabha from 2014-20. He is also a former Professor at the Indian Institute of Management - Bengaluru. He is currently Chairman of the Research Department of the Indian National Congress.

Champaka Rajagopal is a Bengaluru-based urban designer-planner who enjoys working in large teams, thrives on dealing with difficult problems in cities, and is committed to bringing together people with divergent goals and values to work together in public interest.

Pushpamala N. is a performance artist, sculptor, writer and curator in Bengaluru. She is one of the pioneers of conceptual art in India and a leading figure in the feminist experiments in subject, material and language.

Bijoy Ramachadran is a Bengaluru-based architect and urban designer. He is a partner at Hundredhands Design, a widely recognised design practice, and is the Design Chair at BMS College of Architecture, Bengaluru.

Suresh Jayaram

On Bangalore's Cultural Spaces

'Meaningful involvement of youth is a must. Educational institutions can play a key role in this aspect.'

**Arakali Venkatesh, Honorary Secretary,
The Indian Institute of World Culture**

'It is obvious that there is a world of difference in how governmental and private spaces are run in Bangalore. The governmental spaces have a lot of red tape and bureaucracy and are not imaginative in their programming. The private NGOs are more inclusive and democratic, and have diverse programmes and projects that are non-hierarchical and collaborative. There is a lot of freedom and creative energy in these smaller organisations that are more contemporary. This makes Bangalore a hub for experimental arts.'

**Suresh Jayaram, Visual artist, art curator & educator,
1Shanthiroad Studio/Gallery**

'My suggestion is that there are many buildings owned by the government that are not in use or in good condition. These should be offered on medium-term leases to cultural organisations who are then responsible for maintaining and conserving them.'

**Annapurna Garimella, Managing Trustee,
Art, Resources & Teaching Trust**

'Cultural spaces are being perceived in isolation from interconnected issues in Bengaluru. The built environment and architectural context, and cultural histories are given the attention they desperately need. The social and ecological dimensions require equal attention - the economics and inclusivity of people who work in these spaces to the conversations about the type of planting, for example.'

**Smitha MB, Senior Manager, Academics,
IHS - Indian Institute for Human Settlements**

'Cultural places and spaces should not only be places of leisure, they have a fundamental educational role and should also and above all give young people the open-mindedness they need to better understand their future and become good citizens. Furthermore, they must promote access to culture for all and combat inequality and exclusion.'

**Jean Christian Randrianampizafy, Director,
Alliance Francaise de Bangalore.**

'It would be great if funders support infrastructure and capacity building grants for smaller cultural organisations which have spaces, and continue to support them until they are autonomous and able to sustain themselves. Also smaller organisations will benefit a lot if they forge collaborations amongst themselves, through economies of scale, and economies of ideas, by sharing resources that complement and supplement each other.'

**John Xaviers, Programme Officer (Arts Practice),
India Foundation for the Arts**

'Bangalore has been a witness to the evolution of cultural spaces keeping up with the most advanced cities of the world from the old times. Today, a lot of these cultural spaces are largely still inaccessible to everyone. Most of the private spaces are exclusive, elitist and just not affordable for the students and under-served communities. These spaces comprising library, theatre, cinema halls, etc. run by private entities are all non-people centric, casteist and unaffordable. The inherently inaccessible nature of most such cultural spaces, especially those that are privately run not just due to fee/membership charges but also because of the kinds of elite neighbourhoods they are located in. However, there are small pockets of community-owned, community-centred cultural spaces in Bangalore that are striving to make a difference. They lack the comfort of continuous financial support but [are] run by some of the very driven individuals and groups working to create important voices and expression.'

**Ravikiran Rajendran, Creative Director,
Haadibadi Community Library**

'Public spaces are shrinking. The government spaces tend to be bureaucratic in their outlook and operations. Most of these spaces (barring exceptions) are also not in good shape. The private [sector] in contrast has been more engaging and [provides] vibrant spaces for the citizens. Unfortunately they are few, and the city needs a scale-up in making more public spaces available.'

**V Ravichandar, Honorary Director,
Bangalore International Centre**



Designuru 3.0, December 2021 (Source: Aliyeh Rizvi)