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AMITA SARWAL

GOING back to an era before World War I, Singapore's skyline was dominated by colonial buildings which were mostly designed by British architects.

The first, tallest skyscraper in South-east Asia was Singapore's 79.5m Cathay Building (1939) by Frank Brewer. Three decades later another foreigner, the renowned I.M. Pei, gave Singapore the 197.7m OCBC Centre (1976). Another milestone was the multi-use Suntec City (1994) by New York-based Tsao & McKown Architects with local firm DP Architects.

Then came what has turned out to be one of Singapore's most recognisable buildings: Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay, built in 2002. Mr Vikas Gore, director, DP Architects (DPA), was director-in-charge of the project. This made him the first Indian to helm a major development on the island nation which has gained global appreciation.

During the construction boom that began in the 1980s, Indian architects

Building a reputation

Indian architects and designers in Singapore add their touch to the landscape



A first... DPA director Vikas Gore became the first Indian to helm a major development in Singapore when he was put in charge of the Esplanade project.

PHOTO: DP ARCHITECTS

were slow in coming, and when they did, many joined leading local architectural firms of the time such as DP Architects, Ong & Ong, RSP Architects, Architects 61 and RDC, many of which are still active.

Singapore is undisputedly becoming the regional leader among design hubs. Practices offer challenges both in terms of scale and types of projects. Architects and designers based here are also increasingly doing extensive work in India, Indonesia and China.

Perhaps one of the largest design practices belongs to Gaurang Khemka of URBNarc. He hit the headlines when, along with RGSa, he won the International Design Competition for the under-construction Singapore Indian Heritage Centre. Next, Himaal Kak Kaul concentrated on homes and gained renown as design principal of Metamorph. When the over 50-year-old fabindia, one of the best valued brands in India, ventured overseas and opened its maiden retail outlet in Singapore, Ujjwala Naik Goenka who founded Studio Paradigm, was selected to design the store at Paragon.

More about the Indian architects and designers on Pages 12 & 13



Gaurang Khemka: Touching the ground lightly

THE founding director of URBNarc describes his architectural-aesthetics-ecum-funism thus: "Connect to the context, and touch the ground lightly. Use as few resources as possible, but start as bravely as possible." Mr. Gaurang Khemka, 40, still heads his practice in 1993 while at Sankar School of Art & Architecture, Gurugram, India. He did some private residences in New Delhi to "realise my ideas and dreams that were being formulated on paper in the studio".

Within two years, searching freer pastures, he set on a journey stopping en-route to work for some of his favourite architects in India, Singapore, Hong Kong and the US, and did a stint at ILC Buildings studying Urban Design.

In 2009, this journey culminated with the founding of URBNarc; a design practice formulated to focus on all aspects of the built environment. He chose Singapore despite not being registered as an architect here. The decision was taken based on "two bits of living here that affirmed my belief that this is a true hub for South and South-east Asia, has a transport cost and fair economy that enthralls talent and offers a fair chance of success".

Mr. Khemka's results in his initial years as a firm lead, 1 built up the studio to 10 international architects, becoming a visible sampling of the global talent that Singapore attracts. Early commissions included a hotel in Perth; a high-end resort in Kerala and winning an Aquarius-concept mixed use design competition on Mumbai's Juhu Marine Drive. More commissions followed such as the Akshai Seminars in Bali, Indonesia. The 240-room, five-star beach resort is scheduled to open in October this year.

In 2011 Mr Khemka won the international design award for the Indian Heritage Centre, commissioned by the Singapore Government to be opened August this year. He collaborated with RGS&A who doing is still not a registered architect in Singapore.

In parallel, URBNarc has been doing some small offices, a bespoke restaurant, a retail shop, a small boutique hotel, an apartment model flat, a private residence and even a land court "to keep my hand dirty and our knees bloody in realising our dreams", says Mr Khemka.

Building a reputation

WHEN Mr Vikas Gore moved to Singapore in the late 1970s, he became one of the earliest Indian architects here.

He recalls: "Indian architects, whether local Indians or expatriate Indians, were a rarity until the early 2000s."

"When I first came here, although I knew of Indians who had worked short stints before (and moved out) and one or two Indian Singaporeans in local firms, I can't remember actually meeting another architect from India."

"Today, architects from the sub-continent are numerous, as are other professionals. Naturally their contributions has also grown with the increasing numbers. Within my immediate environment there are architects from India working at both senior and junior levels throughout our office and this is mainly true of a number of other practices as well."

Mr Gore continues: "Many of these architects are in teams which shoulder much of the drawing and documentation work and a smaller number are also involved in design. With the introduction of BIM-based software the distinction between these two is diminishing. Buildings in which they have significant roles range from iconic landmarks to major commercial complexes to residential projects and so on. I think it would be fair to say that their influence, while still small, is still larger than their numbers would suggest."

"Yet Mr Gore notes: "Unfortunately because of the increasing numbers, Indians from India seem to slip into an uncomfortable expatriate existence with little empathy or integration with local tastes and priorities. This is partly because of their international experience. Hopefully, over time, this will change."

The senior architect points out the hurdles the younger generation faces. "Nonetheless, at present, architects educated in India offer a common handicap in Singapore. Their degrees are not recognised and strictly speaking therefore they are not architects. The Board of Architects in Singapore and the Council of Architects in India are working at selective mutual recognition at a glacial pace but there is a long way to go."

Despite this, some Indians, after having honed their skills with reputable architectural firms, have set up their own independent practices offering architectural, interior design, landscape and even architectural photography services.

The 61-year-old director at DPA, who has an impressive portfolio of projects to his credit in Singapore, India and Indonesia, says he has "no grand philosophy". He adds: "Just a few thumb rules. I don't believe in piffing historical costs. Historical architecture is specific to a culture that has changed."

From his completed and ongoing projects he selects five which he has a special affinity with:

1. **Explorade - Theatres on the Bay:** "The Government wanted an iconic building. We won the project in association with Michael Wilford and Partners (MWP). Unfortunately, once its initial layout was set, MWP left in 1995. Initially I panicked at having to shape the project alone. But this had become DP's opportunity to shine. We rebuilt our team and shaped Explorade. It opened in 2002 and all that time I was constantly learning something new."

2. **Selea Satellite Earth Station:** "An early favourite project for SingTel. The clients wanted a show-piece to bring schoolkids and visitors to. One day, Nibhi, my son who was six years old then, saw me designing and said, 'Oh! Satellite are up in the air, then how come nothing points up?' It made me think and I designed a sky-flying, blue crescent-shaped gantry to mount microwave dishes on. A touch of inspiration from the mouth of kids!"

3. **RMZ Ecoworld, Bengaluru:** "The 7 million sq ft business park is due for completion by mid-2014. RMZ wants to make Ecoworld a unique experience for everyone working there. I think we will deliver an fair."

4. **Sky Gardens, Bengaluru:** "The G. Corp 20-storey project with two apartments per floor, each with double-height to trace gardens, is Bengaluru's tallest and most attractive residential building."

5. **Select City Walk, New Delhi:** "When Select was tendered out by the Delhi Development Authority (DDA), they needed to give their building a positive as well as negative implications. DDA did allow one crucial flexibility - a temporary roof over the central open space which creates an extensive hi-used public space and simultaneously offers substantial exposure to most shops. Good buildings are always a partnership between a client and an architect - and Select is a good example, with very enlightening clients."



Vikas Gore: Breaking ground with iconic projects



Improve your profile... among Mr Gore's (left) projects in Singapore is the Selela Satellite Earth Station (top).

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Himala Kak Kaul: Shaping the past, present and future



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