

# The Many Shades of India

## A PANEL DISCUSSION

on branding Indian architecture was organised by the Inside Outside Mega Show at Chennai in September, 2010.

The panel comprised four distinguished architects: KT Ravindran, Dr Oscar G Concessao, Benny Kuriakose and S Subbiah.

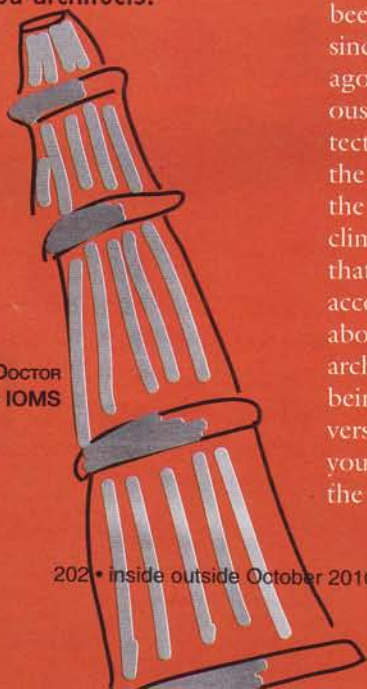
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The primary aim of the discussion was to explore whether Indian architects are losing out in the face of global competition. The panelists were also asked to raise the deeper issues of the ethics of architecture in an increasingly commercial world and whether Brand India has failed to leave an architectural imprint on the increasingly chaotic face of our cities.

As the title of the conclave implies, it is difficult to have one definition of Indian architecture today. If we are content to delegate the designing of many of the mega projects that are being commissioned both in the public and private sectors to foreign architects and international building consortiums, are we then allowing ourselves to be dictated to by a globalising financial capital?

In the process has Indian vernacular architecture lost out to remain as exotic flourishes on the facades of various resorts and hotel interiors? Has there been a failure of architectural nerve, as it were, amongst the fraternity. Or is it just another example of not being able to define contemporary architecture in a manner that is modern enough to take in the new building materials and technology offered by the West, and at the same time being indigenous enough to create what might be called a distinct Indian identity?

As architect KT Ravindran reminded the audience, these are questions that have been raised in the pages of Inside Outside since it began more than three decades ago. 'There has to be a need for a continuous dialogue that takes place with an architect and his work, with an architect and the society in which he or she lives, within the architect's work and the environment, climate, the surroundings and the culture that is both external and internal. If one accepts that as a given, it is futile to talk about success as the only measure of an architect's worth. You don't have to stop being idealistic to be competitive. Conversely, how do you measure success if you cannot also be creatively successful at the same time?' Architecture is a cultural





**K T Ravindran**

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**Benny Kuriakose**

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**Dr Oscar G Concessao**



**S Subbiah**

'This is the language of the future. Indian architects can deliver. You've got to be prepared to stand up to the challenge of globalisation if you want to survive.'

product. It is a dialogue with the built environment in some cases. In others it is how you transform a given space using the materials and techniques that are the most suitable to that space. It's the space that has the transformative power not the form.'

'The Indian skyline is a work in progress,' declared Dr Oscar G Concessao. 'Architectural opportunities are far greater in India than in the West but you do notice a disconnect in the contrast that appears in the swanky townships and "desi" aspirations. Indian architects work harder than their counterparts, but it has also to be said that they lack a global perspective.'

Benny Kuriakose's presentation also reflected some of these concerns. He was inspired by his early association with Laurie Baker. Since that time, Kuriakose is known for the work that he does both amongst the less privileged sections of society and also the more successful ones. Given the harsh realities of the Indian situation, he said that there was plenty of scope for Indian architects to tackle projects in a way that could be humane and also creatively successful. There were large swathes of society whose building needs would not interest the skills of Western architects. At the same time, he insisted that this was not to make a case for Third World solutions by Third World architects. 'To compete more effectively with the challenge of globalisation, Indian architects will have to think much harder. We need to have a passion to excel.'

Taking a completely different view of these issues, S Subbiah showcased the work done by Indian architects in the design and

execution of a project in Mauritius. What made it a challenge was that every element needed for the construction had to be sourced from different parts of the globe. 'This is the language of the future. Indian architects can deliver. You've got to be prepared to stand up to the challenge of the globalisation if you want to survive.' It was awarded the 'Intelligent Building of the Year' prize by the Intelligent Community Forum (ICF) USA in 2005.

In the heated debates that followed, a great deal of divergent views were expressed. Some commentators felt that while in the 1950s and 1960s only architects with the reputation of a Le Corbusier or Louis Kahn came to design in a new India, today, most architects from abroad were hardly known in their own countries and came in as mercenaries employed by promoters and builders and used the expertise of the local Indian architect to actually execute the work; their designs could be called a pastiche of architectural designs with Indian motifs tacked on as an afterthought. They charged what would seem like astronomical fees, but in most cases were content to rubber stamp already used architectural clichés on an already deprived landscape. The one idea that summed up the main sentiment was that what Indian architects might need to consider, is a forum to brand the variety and vitality of contemporary Indian practice in a manner that would make it stand out in the global marketplace – if that is where they need to locate themselves.

