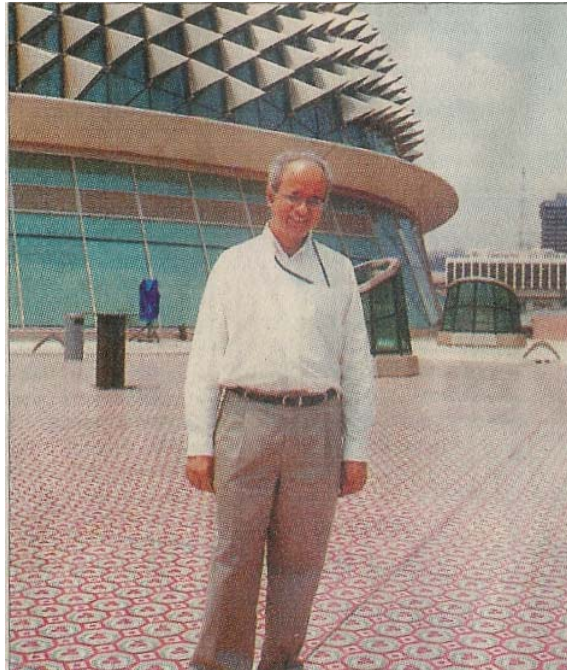


# Sculpting in time

**T**oo many Singaporeans were grumbling: The most distinctive structure the government was building was being designed by a bunch of nuts who had just put up a plexiglass model of a building that was going to be largely built of glass. A degree or so away from the equator, they'd be baking inside the performance venues of the Esplanade, the ambitious performing arts centre being built on the waterfront at Marina Bay, Singapore. At the centre of that brouhaha in June 1994, one man took it calmly. "Well, we saw it in the context that these people had no idea there was a sunshading system being planned," says Vikas Gore, Indian-born Director of DP Architects, one of Singapore's largest architectural firms, which designed and executed the Esplanade - Theatres on the Bay, a 600 million Singapore dollar project which was inaugu-



rated last month. Gore had seen it all before. First came protests that the design competition was opened exclusively to large firms, some foreign ones. Later, the remonstrations came

pouring in. Some said the two domes on the 16-hectare waterfront site resembled fly's eyes, others likened it to two aardvarks, two halves of a durian, a local fruit. Some said its form

followed function, others said the design was illogical. Yet others called it a ripoff from the Sydney Opera House.

"Criticism is something you assume is going to come your way when you begin a project of this significance and this size. When you do a building that's different, if everybody likes it, then almost by definition you've failed in your mission because you've done something fairly predictable. And if it's different, then almost by definition there's going to be controversy. And if you can't stand the heat, then get out of the kitchen, you're in the wrong field,"

**A Mumbaiite designs a marvel in Singapore and redefines Asian architecture, reports KAVITHA IYER**

he laughs.

The 45-year-old architect has strong roots in Mumbai. Having graduated from the Sir JJ School of Architecture in 1977, he was holidaying in Singapore, carrying some drawings with the brash ambition of a fresh graduate and landed up getting a job at DP Architects. "Charles Correa had offered me a job, so I wanted to do only a one-year stint here, but the office wanted me to stay for at least two years, saying after a year I would hardly have learnt the ropes." Twenty-five years later, he's still with the firm that he joined as a graduate with less than 20 others working with him. DP Architects is now a 200-odd personnel strong firm that has won some of the most prestigious projects in Singapore as well as several large ones in India.

"I have three strong affiliations, actually," he says. "I'm a US citizen simply because I happened to be born there, and that was the easiest way of doing a Master's there, since I had

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### **Sculpting in time**

run out of money. My son is now studying there, so we visit frequently. I've been in Singapore so long, I feel very much like a local. I also return to India almost every seven to eight weeks, for work and to meet family. It's a typical cross-national identity." He spent his growing up days in Chembur (His father is former director of TISS Madhav Gore) and has fond memories of college. "The first two years were a little frustrating, JJ was under an educational curriculum that seemed to date back to the Middle Ages. When I was in the second year, we had quite a long students' strike, trying to change that. At the end of the strike, the university revised the curriculum," he says. He had actively supported the strike, in his fourth year he was elected vice-president of the National Association of Students of Architecture, ("still disastrously called NASA'). Gore did a course on urban housing under Charles Correa, won a NASA design competition in his second year for low-cost housing. "That is my area of interest, though in Singapore public housing is unfortunately designed solely by the public sector."

There are projects lined up in India too. He was surprised when an Indian client walked into their office, "out of the blues", Great Eastern Shipping Corporation or GESCO, later bought over by Mahindra and Mahindra. "Not to look a gift-horse in the mouth, but I was curious why we were approached when there are all these great architects in India," says Gore. The answer to that was instructive to DP Architects, in what they could contribute to the Indian scene. The expectations of the Indian market were changing, he had been told, moving from a seller's to a buyer's market. Even in conventional housing project, people were expecting better quality. DP had been exposed to "a level of detailing, completeness and thoroughness not currently known in India" and it came to be that they did the Crossroads mall in Haji Ali with Kapadia Associates.

The same team is working on the second Crossroads, this one in Nariman Point. He says the idea is to localise DPA here, get a foothold in India, a Mumbai office as a subsidiary is to be inaugurated later this month. One Mumbai project is for Godrej, on a mill site in Central Mumbai, he reveals. There is something coming up in Hyderabad, work in Bangalore with the Rahejas will continue.

Perhaps none of these can match up to the sheer passion the Esplanade engendered. "We've been criticized that these buildings don't look traditional,

no Malay roof, no Chinese roof, no Islamic arches and no Indian dome, in fact none of the motifs of the various cultures that make up Singapore. But why should Asians condemn themselves to living with a fossilised museum representation of their culture? Why can't that culture evolve?"

As he hurries to explain, it's obvious that the topic is very close to his heart. Traditional forms, he says, always pushed the limits of technology available to them at that time, making use of the best possible use of every method available. "The fact that these become traditional icons is really a function of history. They're repeated over time so, in popular imagination, they become Asian. And in Asia we had the unfortunate interruption to this flow, when for 200 or 300 years, high culture was anything European. As evolution of these traditional forms was interrupted, they froze."

That's why DPA wanted to build something not only fulfilling its cultural and climatic requirements but also defining what is possible today with technology available now. "It may not define a new Asian architecture but certainly goes some way towards defining what is possible today. And if enough people do this, we might have a new kind of architecture for this part of the world, something very Asian, but with none of those sterile, culturally stagnant icons."