

BY SHOBA NARAYAN

PHOTOS NAMAS BHOJANI

# Success storeys

**Bengaluru's beautiful heritage buildings  
have escaped the wrecking ball thanks  
to some passionate preservationists**





**Reflected glory:  
The National  
Gallery of Modern  
Art in Bengaluru**

**R**ishad Minocher calls himself a hospitality consultant, but he is really an epicurean who enjoys single malts, fine wine, good food and heritage buildings. He happens to live in one: a 175-year-old gem situated in the centre of Bengaluru on Cunningham

Road. Called Hatworks Boulevard, the half-hectare property has been converted into a series of high-end boutiques and retail outlets. Minocher and his wife, Anna, live at the back with their two daughters.

“My grandfather rented it from the original owner, a British man, and then bought it after World War II,” says Minocher. “After my parents passed, we five siblings were left with a choice: should we give it to real-estate developers who would tear it down and construct a high-rise in its place or figure out another way? We chose the other way.”

Minocher and his wife travelled all over Asia and saw Chinese shop-houses being used as retail outlets in Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand. They decided to do the same with their home with an iron-clad contract for all prospective tenants. No major structural changes were allowed and several architectural features could not be touched: the heritage flooring, mud-brick walls, lime plaster, curlicues above the entrance arch reflecting the family’s Parsi heritage, and the Burma-teak false ceiling all had to be handled with care by the tenants. Even fixtures such as air-conditioning units had to be inserted tastefully and not “be stuck here and there so that they are an eyesore”, says Minocher.

Several years into the exercise, Minocher says that the family are happy with their decision. “We have the home to enjoy and leave for future generations. It is a great way to keep these old structures going. Even financially, the rents we are getting [are] commensurate with the rentals in the area,” he says.

Heritage preservation in Bengaluru, formerly known as



**Hatworks  
Boulevard was  
transformed  
from a  
bungalow to  
an up-market  
shopping  
precinct**

Bangalore, has finally come to the fore thanks to an unusual confluence of visionary architects, civic activists and a young workforce that has become wealthy due to the software boom. This resolutely modern city, known more for its call centres and IT companies, has large tracts of army land and several buildings from the colonial era. Winston Churchill served as a young army officer in Bengaluru in 1896, and had outstanding dues at the beautifully preserved Bangalore Club, founded in 1868 by a cadre of British officers. When Prince Charles visited Bengaluru a few years ago and saw an entry in the displayed ledger book of the club from June 1899, in which “Lt. WLS Churchill” was one of the 17 defaulters, he offered to settle the dues on Churchill’s behalf but the club refused.

In the 1980s, this city of five million people started to expand

and thrive thanks to a nascent software industry. Homeowners who lived in old bungalows with their characteristic monkey-top windows and slanting tiled roofs were forced to make a choice. As the land they lived on became more expensive, many sold to real-estate developers who tore down old bungalows and built high-rise buildings in their place.

A few homeowners, however, chose what architects call “adaptive reuse” and transformed their homes into offices, shops and, in one case, the National Gallery of Modern Art (NGMA). The NGMA building used to be the home of Raja Manickavelu Mudaliar. The Mudaliars are an Indian “forward-caste” community with extensive land holdings in Bengaluru. They came from neighbouring Tamilnadu during the colonial era to service the British army cantonments with leather and



**The Burma-teak ceilings in Hatworks Boulevard were preserved (above)**



**Anokhi in RainTree sells quality traditional Indian crafts**

oil goods – they could touch leather while their Brahmin counterparts couldn't – and never left. Two of the nicest homes on Mahatma Gandhi Road (MG Road) in Bengaluru are still owned by people in the Mudaliar community. Arun Pai talks about them as he takes tourists and locals on the Victorian Bangalore Walk that he conducts every weekend (Bangalore Walks, [www.bangalorewalks.com](http://www.bangalorewalks.com)).

The Velu family remains prominent and one of their homes is now a luxury boutique called RainTree. Their main home is now the National Gallery of Modern Art. The patriarch, Raja Manickavelu, used to live in this sprawling mansion on Palace Road. Minocher remembers stories from his mother who used to visit the mansion for dinner parties served with the family's exquisite gold dinner-set. In the 1960s, the state

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government acquired the mansion and, in 2000, decided to house Indian art there. Architectural firms were invited to bid for the complex project involving landscaped gardens, a crumbling colonial mansion and painstaking restoration. The architect who won the project was Narasimhan Naresh.

Naresh shepherded the controversial and complicated project through to completion in 2009 when the gallery was finally open to the public. Since that landmark project, Naresh has developed his passion for restoration and become a spokesperson for the city's architectural heritage. His father, also an architect, was involved in Bengaluru's first heritage preservation project. The city wanted to tear down the fire-engine red Attara Kacheri landmark building. Naresh says his father and his colleagues did something rather smart. They invited the prominent English conservation architect

Sir Bernard Feilden, who had advised on the restoring of British cathedrals, the Taj Mahal and the Great Wall of China, to come in and speak to the city officials. "Feilden persuaded them to let the building stay, thankfully," Naresh says. "It was a great victory for the conservation lobby in those days." Today, the Attara Kacheri building houses the Karnataka High Court.

But such public heritage buildings are rare in Bengaluru. "Maybe we have too much of history in India and therefore very little respect for it," says Naresh. "Historical buildings are seen as old-fashioned and out of date. There is no appreciation of the physicality of buildings; no understanding that unless these buildings are preserved the history of the city and the continuation of its fabric is lost. India's old buildings are seen as archeology, not history; and there is a difference."

Recently, there has been some cause for hope. A team of

### Central Library of Karnataka State in Cubbon Park (left)



**The flame-red gulmohar tree (*Delonix regia*), also known as the poinciana or flamboyant tree**



**RainTree houses luxury boutiques**

locals has been working together with Bengaluru's government on what has come to be known as ABIDe (Agenda for Bangalore Infrastructure and Development Task Force). They have been pushing for better **conservation** and restoration of the city's heritage. Ashwin Mahesh, a professor at the Indian Institute of Management (IIM) and a member of ABIDe, says the state government has announced the establishment of a "heritage cell" within the municipal corporation that would look into three areas: built heritage, natural heritage and cultural heritage. Such a move would be lauded by naturalists and ornithologists such as M.B. Krishna.

Krishna, who also was involved in Bengaluru's urban lakes conservation plan, says that one-third of the tree cover that earned Bengaluru its title of "Garden City" has disappeared in the past three years, mostly to make way for development.

A city-wide train system called The Bangalore Metro Rail is being built and naturalists are angry about the number of trees that have been cut to accommodate trains and stations. "The largest landowner in Bengaluru is the government and, thanks to poor governmental policy, we are losing a large number of old trees to road widening and other work," says Krishna.

Bengaluru is one of India's few cities that has large lakes such as Ulsoor and Hesaraghatta, popular spots for wind-surfers. If implemented, the government's heritage cell will look to preserve not just old buildings but also Bengaluru's lakes, its traditional and scenic neighbourhoods such as Malleshwaram and Basavangudi, and its parks. Lalbagh and Cubbon Park are Bengaluru's two large green spaces. Designed by German horticulturist Gustav Krumbiegel under the auspices of the Mysore Maharajah, both parks have a profusion of flowering trees such as the bright yellow tabebuia, millingtonia, jacaranda, laburnum and flaming red gulmohar. These serially flowering trees scent Bengaluru's boulevards.

Krishna believes multinationals should get involved in preserving Bengaluru's green heritage. He believes that companies such as IBM, Bausch and Carrefour "could use native trees which would not only grow quickly and flourish in Bengaluru's climate but also reduce their landscaping costs as well. Carrying the argument further, they could try to incorporate architectural elements such as cross ventilation and lattice work that are more suited to a tropical climate instead of building glass-and-steel towers that use more energy and electricity."

The good news for Bengaluru is that a dedicated band of naturalists, architects, and civic planners are making a concerted effort to not only influence the government but also gain public support.

"The real challenge is to educate people that old buildings are not bad buildings and they just need some TLC [tender loving care], says Naresh. "We need to come up with a way to make them relevant to modern use."