

Bengaluru has been transformed from India's sleepy southern city into the nation's high-tech hub over the past 20 years.

STREET SMART



PHOTO: DILIP BANERJEE (TOP RIGHT)



But, as Isabel Putjina reports, it's the city's arts scene that is attracting notice today

Once dubbed the “pensioners’ paradise” because many older folks settled here for its temperate weather and green spaces, Bengaluru has been transformed over the past two decades from a sleepy state capital into a global city. The growth of the IT and business outsourcing industries has fuelled an influx of young professionals from across India and overseas. Many Indians returning home after stints abroad choose to live in this South Indian city because of its cosmopolitan flavour and modern outlook. Today, young people form the majority and there are more “outsiders” than locals.

The city's mix of cultures, religions and influences has fostered an eclectic arts scene. Artists are reflecting on and engaging with their city, where tradition and modernity, the classical and contemporary, and the conventional and cutting-edge co-exist. What's more, arts enthusiasts here tend to be well-travelled, open-minded and receptive to new things. From arts festivals to film screenings, concerts to dance performances, art exhibitions to theatre productions, something's going on just about all the time.

Bengaluru-born New Media artist Pushpamala N has witnessed the rapid development of the city's urban landscape and the arts scene's emergence. Having exhibited her work at prestigious venues around the world, including the Tate Modern and Saatchi Gallery in London, and Centre Pompidou in Paris, she is now known both at home and internationally. Rajarajeshwari Nagar, in the city's south-western fringes, is where the artist both lives and works. "This place was considered the boondocks some years ago," she says of her neighbourhood. "Now it's part of a big city. Artistic work often responds to issues like urbanisation. What is the city about? What is its history? How do we define it? Other Indian cities have strong identities: Mumbai, Kolkata and Chennai are colonial cities. But Bengaluru's identity is still developing."

“Other Indian cities have strong identities. Bengaluru’s identity is still developing”



PHOTO: MEENAL AGARWAL (TOP LEFT)



Left: work by Suresh Jayaram displayed at 1 Shanthi Road; Facing page, from top: New Media icon Pushpamala N; Suresh Jayaram

These days, Bengaluru is the nation's third most prominent centre for art after Mumbai and Delhi, though the scene here has its own distinct character. "The scene is much more recent – 30 years or so," she says. "When I decided to study art, there were no schools here. I went to study in Baroda and didn't want to come back. In the 1980s, artists started returning and others moved here, including designers and architects. Today it's the most culturally vibrant city because of its artists. It's a city of New Media, alternative spaces – and what we do as artists also defines it. There are several artist-led spaces and initiatives which make the scene unconventional, alternative and not institutionalised."

One such artist-led space occupies a nondescript building on a street corner in middle-class Shanthi Nagar. A small sign on the gate serves as both name and address: 1 Shanthi Road. It's an art gallery, an artists' collective, a venue for interaction between artists working in different media, and a temporary home and studio for artists from India and abroad. It's also the home of its founder, Bengaluru-born artist Suresh Jayaram, who points out that 1 Shanthi Road's inception nine years ago was a response to his hometown's development. "The city centre started to have its own ➤

“Shanthi Road has presented exhibitions, art installations, contemporary dance and even a Pakistani horror film festival”

dynamics and we wanted to see how we could play a role in the cultural scene. The aim was to create a space for creative conversation and collaboration and to be a catalyst for contemporary art,” he says. “There are too many institutional spaces that are hierarchical and bureaucratic, and not enough informal spaces without government involvement. This is an exclusively artist-driven space. It’s also a meeting place, a place to stop by and have tea or lunch. Informal collaborations often happen in this way.” The gallery has played host to exhibitions and art installations, contemporary dance performances, workshops for underprivileged children and even a Pakistani horror film festival. “Through the residency programme,” adds Suresh, “we have brought many international artists and, as a result, cutting-edge art to Bengaluru. This has added a different dynamic to the city.”

On nearby Double Road, which leads to Lalbagh Botanical Gardens, is another art space known as Jaaga. When Jaaga’s founders were forced to shift the venue elsewhere – just 18 months after it opened – it was just a matter of dismantling the pallet rack shelving system making up its steel structure and reassembling it elsewhere. Jaaga was born out of a search for a central and affordable venue for an arts project. “We were looking for a place where creative people could have their own space,” says artist and co-founder Archana Prasad. “The more challenging the search became, the more we were convinced of this need. Then I happened to meet Freeman Murray, a technologist who had experience with temporary structures. He had built one in Los Angeles and used it as a media collective. Then we met the owner of some vacant land and he let us use it.”

Use of Jaaga (which means “space”) is free to anyone who is engaged in a public activity that has social, environmental, technological or artistic value. The venue has hosted photography exhibitions, book and poetry readings, ➤



เมืองบังกาลอร์ถือได้ว่าเป็นศูนย์กลางของศิลปะอันดับสาม รองจาก มุมไบและเดลี มีกลิ่นไอศิลป์อันเป็นเอกลักษณ์ความใหม่ของเมือง และพื้นที่ในการแสดงผลงานที่มากมาย ทำให้ความติดต่อเรื่ม สร้างสรรค์ก่อเกิดขึ้นอยู่ตลอดเวลา เช่นแกลอรี “บ้านเลขที่ 1 ถ.ชานที” ซึ่งเป็นแหล่งรวมศิลปินจากทั่วอินเดียมาพูดคุยกัน เป็นทั้ง แกลอรีแสดงงานศิลปะและการประโภตกันของศิลปะหลายรูปแบบ นอกจากนี้ยังมีโครงการจาก ที่เกิดขึ้นเพื่อทำพื้นที่แสดงงานศิลปะ เคลื่อนที่ในใจกลางเมืองบังกาลอร์ ในราคาน้ำเงินสามารถจับต้องได้ โดยมีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อให้ผู้คนสามารถกิจกรรมเชิงศิลป์ อาทิ นิทรรศการแสดงภาพถ่าย การอ่านบทกวี ฯลฯ โดย จานันจะมีความพร้อมทั้งด้านสาธารณูปโภคและ เทคโนโลยี ถือเป็นการร่วมมือกันของเหล่าศิลปินอย่างแท้จริง

Above: Jaaga founders; Below: interior view of National Gallery for Modern Art

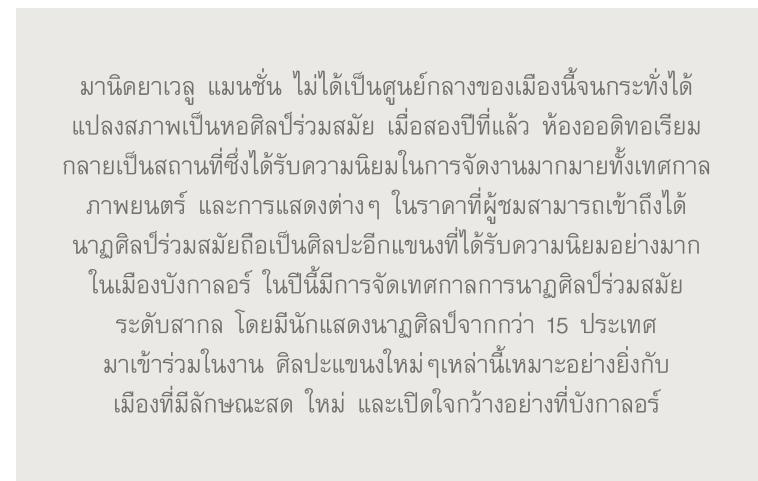


“Mumbai is commercial and Delhi is bureaucratic. The contemporary dance scene here is young and dynamic”

workshops, film festivals, vegan potlucks and a dance performance specially choreographed to suit the building. With real estate at a premium, Jaaga offers not only a space accessible to everyone but also a creative impetus for the city's artists and technology entrepreneurs. Wi-Fi-enabled personal workspaces are available to people trying to get start-ups off the ground or doing any kind of digital or creative work. Through its fellowship programme, many international figures in various creative fields have made contributions to Jaaga.

As eye-catching as it is, Manikyavelu Mansion on Palace Road was not a city landmark until it was transformed into the National Gallery for Modern Art. After years of lobbying by local artists, the gallery finally opened its doors two years ago, giving the city a much-needed showcase for some of India's most celebrated modern artists. The gallery's auditorium has become a popular spot for staging film festivals and dance and theatre performances. The beautifully landscaped and tree-shaded garden has played host to installations and site-specific performances. Even the fountain became the canvas for a movement installation by local contemporary dancers Veena Basavarajaiah and Deepak Shivaswamy, who were not afraid to get their feet wet for art's sake.

Though Bengaluru has a long tradition of staging Indian classical dance performances, contemporary dance also boasts an enthusiastic following here. This year's edition of the Attakkalari India Biennial featured performing artists from at least 15 countries. The festival was the brainchild of Jayachandran Palazhy, a trailblazer in the Indian contemporary dance scene and the founder of repertory company Attakkalari, which is also India's first contemporary dance school. Having moved from Kerala to Bengaluru about ten years ago, he has nothing but praise for the city's cultural climate. “Bengaluru is a very friendly city for contemporary dance,” he says. “Mumbai is too commercial and Delhi is ➤



Above: Jayachandran Palazhy, founder of dance company Attakkalari; **Below:** National Gallery for Modern Art



What was once known primarily as a place for the elderly is now renowned as a city of artistic vision and creative endeavour

a bureaucratic government city. The contemporary dance scene here is young and dynamic and audiences are receptive and open.” Attakkalari and the biennial have succeeded in putting Bengaluru on the map, both domestically and internationally, as the centre of India’s dance scene.

Next to a post office in residential JP Nagar in South Bengaluru sits one of the city’s best-loved cultural venues, the Ranga Shankara Theatre. It opened seven years ago, fulfilling the dream of renowned stage actors Shankar and Arundhati Nag to create a space dedicated exclusively to theatre. When Shankar’s life was cut short in a tragic accident, Arundhati built the theatre in memory of her husband and called it Ranga Shankara (Shankar’s Stage).

It has become a gathering place for theatre lovers and its annual ten-day theatre festival is among the highlights of the local cultural calendar. The festival’s mission to stage “a play a day”, an idea originated by Arundhati herself, means that more than 300 productions are presented annually in Kannada, Hindi and English. Making theatre accessible remains a priority, explains Gayathri Krishna: “The idea of Ranga Shankara came from the fact that Bengaluru did not have affordable spaces for theatre. It is now affordable not just for the performing community but also for audiences.”

In January, Bengaluru’s newest performing arts venue opened in Whitefield. This neighbourhood of technology parks and gated communities on the city’s eastern limits had little to offer culturally until the Jagriti Theatre came along. Jagriti (meaning “awakening”) is the fulfilment of a dream shared by actors Arundhati and Jagdish Raja, founders of the Artistes’ Repertory Theatre, a well-known English-language theatre group. It was even built on a tract of land where the couple’s farm once stood. “The goal is not just to have a dedicated space for the performing arts but also to professionalise English theatre with a resident company, workshops and experimental performances,” says its director,

Anu Frederick. Jagriti’s inaugural season, which kicks off in December, features six plays, three of which are the resident company’s own.

Bengaluru’s arts scene is varied, dynamic and forward-looking, and young and vital enough that it’s affordable and accessible. Local artists’ collectives continue to blaze trails, face down challenges and make things happen while reclaiming the city centre and setting up new spaces in which to create, connect and collaborate. What was once known primarily as a place for the elderly is now renowned as a city where artistic visions are realised and creative endeavours given the space and opportunity to flourish. *

ตัดจากที่ที่ทำการ “ประณีย์ย่าและพี่ นาการ์ ดีอิงละครรังกา ชาน ค่ารา สถานที่ซึ่งเต็มไปด้วยวัฒนธรรมและเรื่องราว โรงละครแห่งนี้ สร้างขึ้นเพื่อเป็นอนุสรณ์แก่ ชาgar์ อรุณดาตี นักแสดงผู้ล่วงลับ โรงละครรังกา ชานค่ารา มีจุดเด่นที่มีการแสดงละครวัณลະ 1 เรื่อง นั่นหมายความว่าใน 1 ปี จะมีละครกว่า 300 เรื่องที่เตี่ยวน และเป็นที่ น่าสนใจว่าในเดือนมกราคมปีหน้า จะมีโรงละครแห่งใหม่ผุดขึ้นอีกใน แบบไวท์พลัตต์ นับได้ว่าเราดวงคิลปะในเมืองบังกาลอร์นั้นหลากหลาย ไม่หยุดนิ่ง กระนั้นด้วยความสดใหม่ก็ทำให้ผู้เดินทางคิลป์เหล่านี้ สามารถเข้าถึงได้ จากเมืองพักผ่อนของผู้ลุงอายุ บังกาลอร์วันนี้ จึงกลายเป็นเมืองที่คิลปะนั้นกำลังเบ่งบาน

Below: work by Ranga Shankara



PHOTO: RAMMORRISON (BOTTOM)