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REVIEWED BY FELIPE CORREA

DECCAN TRAVERSES

THE MAKING OF BANGALORE'S TERRAIN
by Anuradha Mathur and Dilip Da Cunha

New Delhi: Rupa, 2006

Deccan Traverses: The Making of

Bangalore's Terrain presents a thoroughly unique reading of Bangalore, India's "Garden City," and the multiple intellectual and material constructs that have shaped it. Furthermore, the scope and ambition of the work presented in the book (which parallels an exhibition that opened in India and Philadelphia), goes beyond Bangalore itself — it questions the role of landscape architecture as a last act of design and re-frames it as a basic initiator of settlement. This intriguing view of the Indian city and its multiple forms of urbanism pointedly criticizes India's time-honored reliability on the imported master plan exemplified by erroneous interpretations of Le Corbusier's Chandigarh or the most recent TVA-inspired Tehri Dam in northern India. As a potential alternative, India-born, Philadelphia-based designers Anuradha Mathur and Dilip Da Cunha propose an inventive use of the diagram as a transformative tool that can distill and restructure an array of organizational systems already at play within an extended urban field where the

boundaries between consolidated city and open territory are hard or impossible to define.

Always resisting the most straightforward and obvious historical associations, the authors go beyond the everyday life of Bangalore and dig into the material qualities that are imperceptible to the naked eye but can be rendered visible through multiple mapping techniques. In doing so, they construct a "thick" visual and written narrative that goes back more than three hundred years to trace the most significant colonial enterprises that have motivated this terrain to transmute from "Naked Country" to "Garden City" and most recently to a "Technology Capital." Mathur and Da Cunha's inventive work cuts through multiple agencies and actions that throughout time have been taken to represent Bangalore's material and cultural milieu. They re-assemble the city into a set of animate fields that depict a wide range of ongoing negotiations between an aggregation of historic and current social and political pressure systems and the different geogra-

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phies/geometries ubiquitous to each. As one travels through the rich accumulation of archival and cartographic material, one encounters an elaborate array of images, drawings, mappings, and diagrams that go beyond the fixed conventions of visual logic and the use of normative symbols. The work aggressively favors representational tools that are deeply infused by the ecologies being explored, yet it remains faithful to the interpretative and transformational strength of architectural modes of representation. As the work moves from the realm of the real into the representational, each terrain is intensely thickened by a well-calibrated injection of material and cultural events, resulting in a critical redefinition of the burrowed site, and the surfacing of the multiple entities that compose it.

Perhaps the most significant claim made in the project is that Bangalore is as much a cultivated eye as it is a cultivated land. The authors, by revisiting many of the most salient historical milestones of the city, astutely capture the dual nature of the multiple expeditions that slowly transformed this territory into India's Garden City. If the initial objective of these extraordinary pioneers was either to exploit the territory, in the case of the East India Company, or to set forth projects of global significance, such as measuring the curvature of the earth or documenting local cultural ways, each of these actions had a primordial role in the emergence of this landscape. All these actions left significant physical and cultural imprints in the region. The steady accretion of imported measurements, materials, skills, and images slowly amalgamated into a physical-material construct that makes up contemporary Bangalore. A highly significant example is the many surveyor drawings of Bangalore. Even though these maps were originally done in behalf of for the East India Company, they had a much broader impact in the local culture—they were the most precise and effective records of the city's morphology and served as a primary resource for decades to come.

The most intriguing issues in the book emerge from the authors' ability to go beyond individual colonial undertakings and

construct a visual profile that selectively imbricates the contents of the different expeditions and discoveries that have unfolded throughout the last four centuries. In doing so, they highlight their active role in the shaping of the physical and dynamic structures of the terrain. War, Surveying, Picturing, and Botanizing are the four main chapters in the book and reveal the most salient actions that have shaped Bangalore and the broader Deccan Plateau; these are imaginatively appropriated by the authors to inform the book's "the sites to be investigated."

War: This section documents the first set of urbanistic actions, military in this case, which defined the foundation and growth of Bangalore. Its development is staged as a highly animate material event rather than a bound spatial entity. In doing so, Mathur and Da Cunha rigorously challenge the traditional definition of the Maidan (an open area in or near a town, often used for collective events) as a fixed spatial type. Furthermore, they reconstruct it as a field condition that throughout history has accommodated the unfolding of a mixed set of urban events with varied intensities and rhythms. Even today, the Maidan continues to act as the most significant public realm within the Bangalorean collective. This particular point is exquisitely profiled in two large-format silkscreen prints that carefully single out and calibrate the morphological changes of the four main roads that define the origins of the city and that throughout the years have served as a backdrop for a wide array of urban events.

Survey: This section reconstructs the multiple geodesic expeditions that traversed this territory and single out their agency in establishing an infrastructural framework that goes beyond the specific artistic/scientific objectives of the mission itself. British explorers established various measuring devices that brought together a wide set of physical and social dynamics into a single picture plane. Through multiple cartographic devices, including triangulation, explorers could effectively track diachronically the fluctuations of fluvial systems, climatic variations, and the proliferation of diseases and their potential medicines. The authors critically reframe

the expeditioner's role as a generator of an abstract infrastructural machine that can simultaneously track and inform a broad set of physical and social dimensions. Ultimately, the findings of the expeditioners laid out a latent infrastructure that played a significant role in the urban forms adopted by future settlers.

Picture: This section engages Picturesque Painting, a nascent genre in 18th-century England, as an art form that holds an inherent potential to serve as both an aesthetic and a scientific practice. The authors focus on the latter, and redefine it as a significantly effective device able to isolate, archive, and transplant elements within the landscape, creating an effective visual survey of the terrain at play. In re-traversing the grounds explored primarily by British artist Thomas Daniell, the authors re-present the multiple elements that make up Bangalore's ground, singling out the most significant material constructs in the city. One of the most compelling stories told in this portion of the book reveals how the plethora of small bodies of water, ubiquitous to current Bangalore and perceived as an original ecology in the city, are in reality an artificial hydrologic network that tailored the grounds for denser settlement and agricultural production. Every tank is both an individual entity and a key player in a much broader hydrological /political system; the result is a checkerboard of disrupted ownerships.

Garden: This section uses the Lalbagh, the most prominent public garden in the city, as a point of departure for a visual and textual narrative that effectively conveys the complex botanical matrix that has resulted from the introduction, acclimatization, and dissemination of the flora that today make up Bangalore's botanical carpet. The book astutely reveals how Bangalore, by serving as a "botanical depot" that deliberately collected flora from geographies as far away as South America, slowly transformed from "naked country" to "garden city." The narrative further describes social practices that emerged from botanical explorations and depicts how these are still active in everyday Bangalore.

As the heavily saturated pages of this volume permeate our active perception, two broader questions arise: What is the

significance of “exhibition” as a critical form of practice in this particular context and in the design disciplines at large? Does this disciplinary endeavor generate enough traction to critically engage, intervene, and induce a larger transformation in Bangalore's terrain? The authors are conspicuously silent about both questions, and perhaps the tentative success of their form of practice lies in the abstract, yet generative manner in which they address the potentiality of design in a context where top-down interventions seem not to affect the intrinsic material forces of the city. On the one hand, through the introduction of a large number of synthetic drawings, the book goes beyond its archival origins and cleverly transcends the boundaries of mute documentation. On the other, Mathur and Da Cunha intentionally stop short of synthesizing their findings in concrete design proposals for Bangalore and the broader Deccan Plateau. As an alternative to “pure notation” or a “finite project,” the authors seem to appropriate a middle ground that claims the diagram as an essential tool that can fuel the transition from the archival act of documentation into a speculative act of design. It is through the authors' ability to endorse engagement rather than objectification that this project can successfully cast significant influence in Bangalore's design community at large, and in doing so fuel a greater degree of awareness towards of their most immediate environment.

Acting as a Deluzian transgressive device, this seamless accretion of interpretative drawings specifies particular operations that negotiate between Bangalore's semi-consolidated urban matter and its abundance of unfastened activities. More importantly, by being simultaneously determinate and indeterminate, these depictions also allow a space for active viewers to ask critical questions from a fresh vantage point and use this work as a vehicle to reinterpret their most immediate pedestrian realities. For example, the reexamination of former triangulation measurements reveals a very clear attitude towards the region's topography and can shed significant light on infrastructural projects and how these can be tailored to better fit this rugged terrain. Mathur and

Da Cunha cleverly allow induction to displace deduction to provide an ample cultural and physical framework that can provoke and inform future urban transformations and tactically hint at specific projects. Through the instrumental use of the diagram, the authors can reveal unfamiliar relationships among highly familiar objects, and in doing so propose a world other than what exists: a flipside cosmos that allows for new realities, and in doing so, sets forth an alternative method that can help us move away from the most aphasic forms of development that seem to dominate Bangalore's and many other current urban scenarios. □