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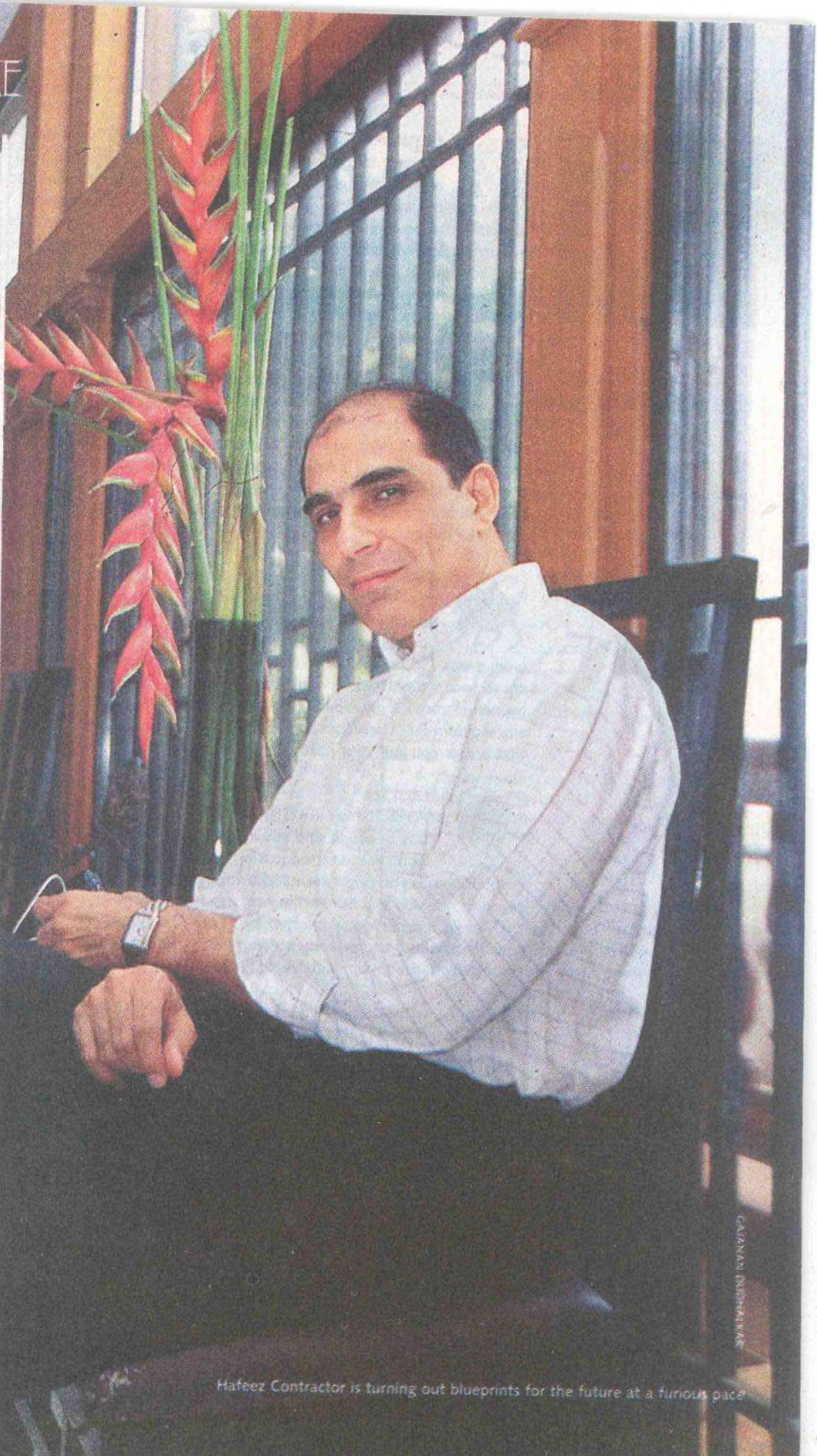
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Soaring to new heights

Ace architect Hafeez Contractor is altering India's cityscapes at a breathtaking speed

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Soaring to new heights

Ace architect Hafeez Contractor is altering India's cityscapes at a breathtaking speed, says **Aarti Dua**

It is a 120-storey skyscraper that will soon look down upon Dubai and the blue waters of the Arabian Gulf around it. It's called Marina Tower and it's hoping to grab the title as the world's tallest residential building. The architect creating this giant finger into the sky is none other than India's own superstar at the drawing-board: Hafeez Contractor.

India's top architect is reaching upwards to greater heights than ever before. Contractor, the man who more than any other, has changed India's cityscapes is turning out new blueprints for the future at a furious pace.

If building tall skyscrapers is an indication of professional success, then Contractor is certainly giving proof that he has arrived at the top. Besides Dubai's Marina Tower, he has just bagged the contract for another 70-storey skyscraper in Dubai.

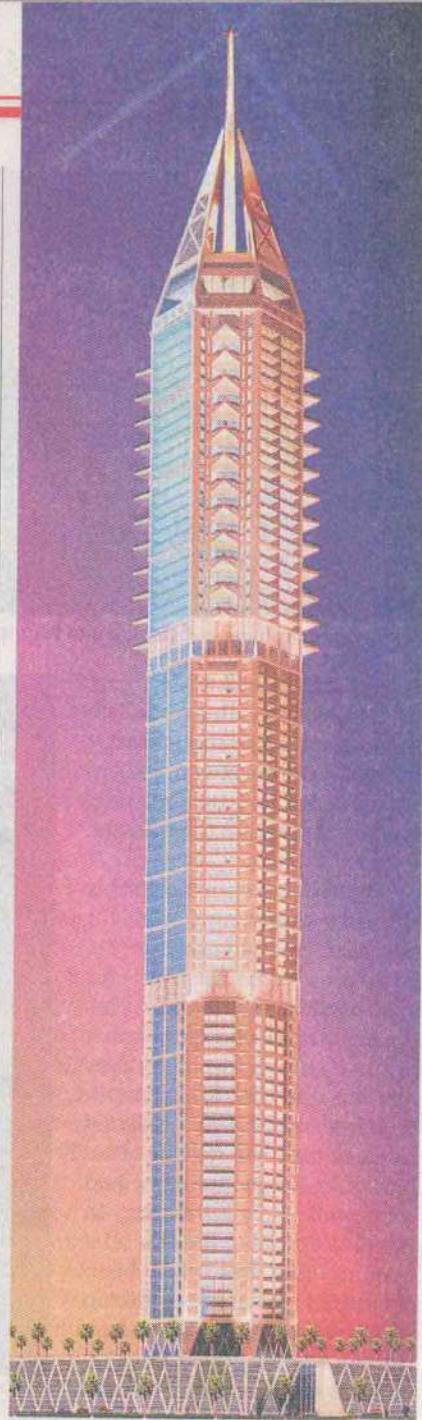
Also, he has turned out designs for another building that will vie for the crown of the world's tallest building — if it's given the green signal for construction. The building that has tentatively been named Everest Towers will be 710 metres tall and is being planned by the Noida Development Authority on the outskirts of Delhi. When finished it will be 202 metres higher than Taipei 101, the building that's now the world's tallest. "I always do buildings for a purpose," says

Contractor. For him Everest Tower is a symbol of India's coming of age.

Contractor is riding the crest of an economic boom and he's putting his own special stamp on cities across India. He has been hired to produce attention-getting apartment complexes and townships in places as far apart as Calcutta and Calicut. He is building malls and office blocks in half-a-dozen cities. He's so busy, in fact, that in the last six months he has even turned down projects that are "not so challenging" — he has never done that before.

Which is the largest of them all? It's hard to tell as Contractor moves speedily from one project to another. For instance, he has the mandate for the 220 Sahara City townships that are coming up in different parts of the country — work has already started on three townships at Jhansi, Indore and Bhopal. Then there are projects like the residential towers at MP Mills in Tardeo, Mumbai, and a project with DLF in Calcutta. He's also designing a Four Seasons hotel in Mumbai.

At a slightly different level, he's putting up a string of cutting-edge projects for Infosys Technologies. He's building a campus for the company in Pune — the building has a transparent frame to reflect the company's ideology. In Bangalore, Contractor is doing a convention centre for Infosys as well as



An artist's impression of the 120-storey Marina Tower which is coming up in Dubai

a set of buildings for Progeon, the tech major's business process outsourcing arm. Also, he's working on Infosys' Mysore campus, which will also be a very novel design and another building in Chennai.

So how many projects does he do at a time? "As many as we can," he shrugs. Of his approach to his work, he says, "I just try and solve a problem, that's it. There is no fixed formula for anything, the formula is in finding a solution. I



Contractor is turning out striking and futuristic designs for software giant Infosys. (From left) Artist's impressions of the Infosys convention

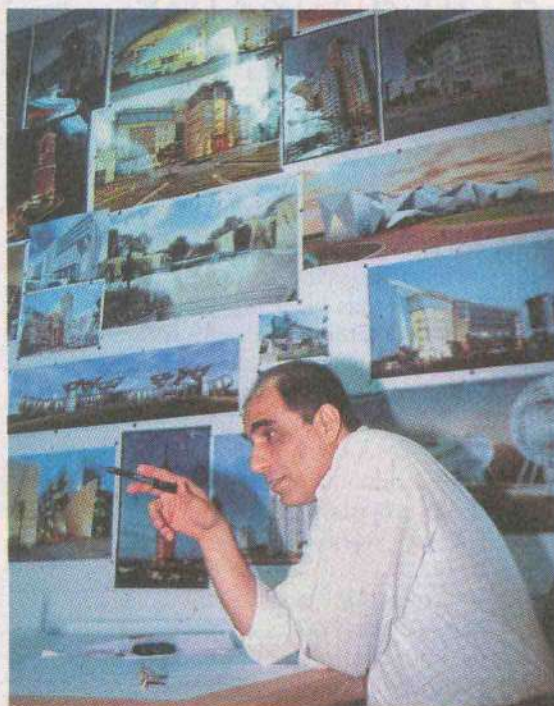
have done that all my life."

"I always ran after work. The money was a by-product. Yes, I will insist on my fee and where someone is taking me for a ride, then I will play him on the same footing," he says.

The soaring demand for his work isn't surprising. Contractor has been creating eye-catching structures and interiors for almost the last two decades. He's the architect of choice for many of the country's top developers like DLF and the Hiranandanis. Working for DLF he designed many of the most striking office blocks in Gurgaon and helped send the sleepy district in Haryana zooming into the 21st century. He has also been responsible for many of the top Hiranandani projects. In fact, Dubai's Marina Tower is being done in collaboration with the Hiranandanis who have already started construction on the complex.

Contractor has certainly come a long way from his trademark neo-classical residential buildings with their faux columns, cornices, peaked roofs *et al.* And though he still sticks to the style, especially in residential projects, it is the corporate offices that seem to be defining his body of work in recent years. For instance, Contractor is using cutting-edge technology to create starkly modern design-centric structures like the Infosys Technologies' centre at Pune.

In the world of architecture,



GANMAN DUDHALKAR

Contractor has his critics. They allege that his buildings sometimes stick out like sore thumbs and that he doesn't pay enough attention to make them blend into the surroundings. He has also come under attack from architects who are opposed to tall structures like Marina Tower.

Contractor himself is hard-nosed when it comes to architectural issues. He's unapologetic about turning Haryana farmland into a sprawling middle-class town. "Cities can't stop growing, you can't cull human beings like you cull animals." Nevertheless, he is working on ways to bring, "the forest

comes back to the city:" and he's hoping that Infosys will accept some proposals on this subject.

Do his buildings lack context, as his critics point out? He dismisses the allegation. "They are looking at buildings in isolation. When a 'structure needs a context, you have to design it," he says. According to him, people — and buildings — talk in different context. So a one-on-one conversation will be different from talking to an audience, which is different from a Ganpati procession — "How do you talk in that," he says.

His belief in tall buildings stretches to his own Dadar Parsi Colony in Mumbai. It's a tranquil neighbourhood and one of the few in the city with lots of greenery. But it is changing now with the four to seven-storey

buildings giving way to highrises. So how does Contractor feel about this development in his backyard? Recently, his wife asked him to sign a petition put out by people in the colony against a neighbour who wanted to build an 18-storey building coming up opposite their own block. "I said no, we cannot sign it," he recalls.

His home itself is a tastefully furnished duplex apartment. A wooden staircase in the foyer below leads to a sitting room, where a mirrored wall adds a sense of space and depth. The room is conventionally furnished with plush cream-coloured sofas and sheer



centre at Bangalore, the Mysore campus and another one at Pune

curtains. There are pieces of art on all the walls. Beyond, is another more modern parquet-floored sitting room with black leather and steel sofas and chequerboard curved swivel chairs.

His belief in progress is unshakeable and clearly stretches into the Parsi Colony. Seated on the black leather sofa, Contractor embarked on the story of a neighbour Dinoo Dossabai, who lived in Dadar Parsi Colony all her life and whose grand-uncle once had a bungalow where the BEST bus depot now stands. When he sold the bungalow and moved to a "ground-and-one-upper" house, he would moan about the good old days. By the time Dinoo Dossabai grew up, the ground-and-one-uppers gave way to ground-and-three-uppers. Contractor now lives in a ground-and-seven-upper. Says Contractor: "If I start objecting now, the 18-storey won't come up. Ten years down the line, there will be 50 to 60-storey buildings. We are living in a city, we have to live together."

He's also strongly against stopping people from entering the city, which is one solution that some civic leaders sometimes fall back on. Says Contractor: "I came to Bombay 50 years ago, some people came five to 10 years ago, some five days ago, do we have the right to tell them you can't come now?"

He's also relentless about man-made progress and issues like reclamation. He has put up a proposal to reclaim land on Mumbai's east coast a few years ago which has been stuck in a bureaucratic morass ever since.

Hafeez Contractor is riding the crest of an economic boom and he's putting his own special stamp on cities across India

"Reclamation has become a taboo. Why? Hong Kong is reclaiming land as big as Bombay city, Japan is reclaiming, the US is doing it, why are we not reclaiming?" he questions. He also hits out at environmentalists who've opposed the project: "All these environmentalists who are suddenly so concerned about mangroves, they don't care a tuppence about them actually," he says.

Contractor, perhaps, not surprisingly, is a strong supporter of the giant developers. The way he sees it, they stick their necks out and put their money on the line and deal with the multiple layers of red tape. After all, he argues, the Government hasn't done very much to get people housing.

His pet subject, in fact, is Mumbai and he has over the years put together one mega-plan after another to alter the face of the city. He also argues that taxes must be raised substantially because, "just as you cannot run a household today on your grandfather's income levels, you can't maintain a city

on old taxes". "There is nothing beautiful about Bombay, the city is falling apart," he says.

Again, if he has his way, Mumbai would get an entirely new look. There would certainly be more highrise buildings. He reckons it's the only way out if everyone in the city is to be given housing. "Our prices are not prices of reality but of scarcity," he says. "Development is not going to stop. If you don't allow intense development to happen, Bombay will become a garbage city."

Contractor knows that he has been at the centre of an architectural revolution of sorts. When he first started working at architectural firm A T Khareghat everything from buildings to fees were on a smaller scale. "We once got a job of 300,000 sq ft and our fees were Rs 3 lakh to Rs 4 lakh. We talked about that for days. Today, things have changed, we are talking of floor plates of 100,000 sq ft."

Like him or hate him, there is no denying that Contractor has single-handedly changed the landscape of cities like Mumbai and Gurgaon so much so that Hafeez clones have begun sprouting up everywhere. But he says, "The most satisfying thing is when you hear people say that other people are copying you."

Will the clones overtake the master? And will people be looking down on India's cities from and spotting the Hafeez Contractor buildings all around? He's constructing at a faster pace than ever before but history will have the last word. ♦