

# CITY OF OVERSIZED PROMISES?

Struck by endless real estate adverts promising "a lifetime of privilege", this German artist raises questions about life in our fast-evolving metro

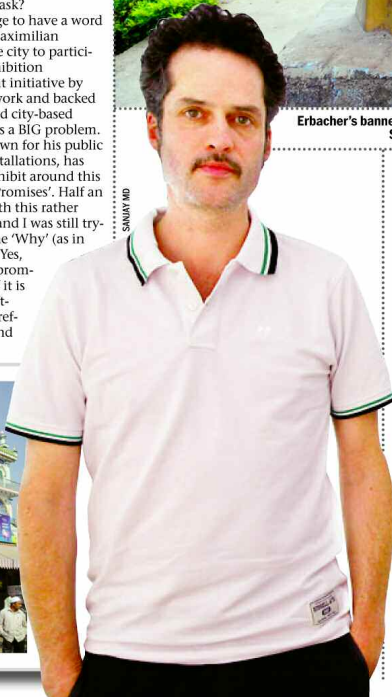
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They seem to be everywhere: billboard hoardings by real estate developers promising a piece of heaven on earth — A life full of privilege awaits you / Spectacular views from every angle / A lifetime of peace and tranquility awaits you. How many times have you read such impressive claims and summarily dismissed them a minute or two later? As a local you know what to expect... you would be happy if there are good roads leading to your home, 24x7 water and power supply, maybe a patch of green to look at... perhaps, a clubhouse... okay, so the list can go on depending on where you live and how big your budget is. The point is the ground reality is rather different from the cornucopia of pleasures that are being prom-

ised by property developers. So, what's the big deal you may ask? Well, if you manage to have a word with German artist Maximilian Erbacher, who's in the city to participate in the public exhibition NextBangalore (a joint initiative by Germany's Next Network and backed by Goethe-Institut and city-based MOD Institute), this is a BIG problem. In fact, the artist, known for his public interventions and installations, has planned his entire exhibit around this theme of 'Oversized Promises'. Half an hour into my chat with this rather soft-spoken German and I was still trying to grapple with the 'Why' (as in why does it matter?). Yes, they make oversized promises. And yes, some of it is offensive given the oft-repeated and blatant references to "luxury" and "chosen few".



Erbacher's banner on Markham Road. (Below) The banner at Shivaji Market was removed by the landlord



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That's when it hits me. Between the din of traffic and the Backstreet Boys track playing in the roadside cafe, when Erbacher says, "Where I come from if you break a promise, it's a sin." Incidentally, he comes from Cologne, a German city that was heavily bombed during World War II. Most of the current city, Erbacher informs, is an amalgamation of modern architecture and restored facades of historical buildings. Coming back to Erbacher's premise on promises, it's hard not to point out that this is a country where they're broken everyday — whether it's politicians or property developers. But Erbacher is quick to point out that "promises made on a personal level are stronger than law". "For example German Federal Chancellor Helmut Kohl still keeps his promise not to reveal his party contributions although he went into prosecution." Besides, if you break a promise, you lose ground, he adds. And that's just not acceptable. When Erbacher landed in Bengaluru about a month ago on MOD's bangaloResidency programme, he wasn't really sure what his project would be... the only thing that he knew about the city was that it was a fast-evolving one and he wanted to somehow document the fallout of

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that. Two weeks into his stay, after meandering through the streets of Bengaluru on foot, on bus, via the metro and by auto-rickshaw, he couldn't help but take notice of endless hoardings on our roads selling "dream homes" designed specifically for the "chosen few". These piqued Erbacher's interest enough for him to land up at the sales office of one such property under development in Hebbal. "It was a rainy day and I was in flip-flops which got rather muddy," recalls Erbacher, who was asked to wear cover ups over his sandals so he wouldn't muck up the floor. Documenting the exchange in his notebook (it's part of his exhibit currently on display in Cobalt on Church Street), Erbacher writes how he was offered coffee: "Normal? Cappuccino?" and so on. When he finally asked the receptionist / sales person who their target audience was, he was told "Middle class buyers". For Erbacher, that turned out to be ironical as he had just gotten there in an auto, the driver of which described himself as middle class, without any savings and struggling to get by.

Putting down his thoughts on paper, Erbacher decided to print large banners with words and phrases taken from the ads he had seen and he put them up across three locations in the city: Shivaji Nagar, Russell market and Markham Road. The three banners which read: 'We believe luxury is best served in small quantities', 'Before the last are taken book your space in the sky' and 'Open your windows to the great wide outside' went up on the sides of buildings or shops. The print was super-sized. Perhaps, to mirror the hard sell most realtors indulge in. Incidentally, the sign on Markham Road has a statue of Ambedkar pointing to it from across the road. "I had no idea who he was until a colleague pointed it out later," Erbacher says. So far, his work has evoked some strong reactions, though not because of their content. At Russell market and Shivaji Nagar, for instance, the landlords turned up demanding how it was put up without their permission. Turns out the tenants had allowed Erbacher to put up the signages under the impression that they were the actual owners. "The real owner couldn't believe that I had not paid them (tenants) for putting up the flags (banners); this even after I showed them the letter from the Institute," rues Erbacher, who lost one of the banners in the process. The other one hangs outside the Cobalt building. What's interesting is that when you view Erbacher's banners outside of the context of the advertisements it does leave an uncomfortable aftertaste. Are we really trying to cocoon ourselves against certain ground realities? Most importantly, are we turning into a city of oversized promises? Erbacher makes another relevant point that hasn't even occurred to me. "I feel new identities come along with the new housing developments which are not rooted anymore with the heritage and traditions of one's ancestors," he says. The shiny villas of the ads, for instance, remind Erbacher of earlier journeys to the United Arab Emirates and Shanghai. "The new urbanity then becomes exchangeable, custom-tailored and its 'ultra luxurious villas' accessible" for the chosen few of the Pepsi Generation." Erbacher's colleague at MOD coined the term The Pepsi Generation to denote the new privileged class. Whether or not you agree with Erbacher's perspective, there's no doubt that you will look at your next larger-than-life dream home billboard more closely. The whole idea of Erbacher's work is to stick a needle in your side; so you don't look at your city blindly. Then perhaps, we would feel like Erbacher; indignant that someone is making promises they can't possibly keep.

