

## Hall of Peace inaugurated

Auroville's Hall of Peace, the home of the Peace Table for Asia, was inaugurated on February 11th, 2014



PHOTO: IRENO GUERCI

“It came to me in a dream, a dream inspired by Sri Aurobindo, when I had the opportunity to buy two huge logs of 300-year old Eastern Black Walnut,” wrote George Nakashima. “The richly grained rare timber asked to be used in its full length and width. The idea came to me to fashion from them Altars of Peace, each measuring approximately 3.3 by 3.3 metres, to fully express the texture, natural shape and free edges of the wood. The Altars, one for each continent on earth, would be places for people from all religions and faiths to gather together in prayer or silent meditation.”

The project took off in 1984 and the first Altar of Peace, the Altar for North America, was placed in the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York. It was dedicated on New Year's Eve, 1986, in an impressive ceremony with a Concert for

Peace conducted by Leonard Bernstein and in the presence of diplomats from many countries and representatives of many faiths.

After George Nakashima's passing in 1990, his daughter Mira and son Kevin continued his legacy. This included finding suitable locations for the Altars of Peace or Sacred Peace Tables in the other five continents. Russia in particular became a focal point. George had a deep love for the Russian people and wished that the Peace Table for Europe would be located in Russia. But it was an epic struggle that took nearly 12 years.

The Peace Table for Europe was first dedicated in the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York in 1995, in an occasion to celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the United Nations. But as the right place had yet been found in Russia, the Table returned to its place of birth. In 1999, en route to Russia, it first traveled to The Hague in

The Netherlands, where it served as a unifying presence at The Hague Appeal for Peace in May 1999. Among the thousands who visited it were young Greek and Turkish Cypriot teenagers who signed an agreement of mutual understanding and peace on this Table.

After the conference, the Table was stored in The Hague until it could continue its journey to its permanent home in the Russian Academy of Arts in Moscow, which was being renovated. Following the February 2001 opening of the Academy, on 26th June 2001, the Peace Table for Europe found a permanent place in its Peace Room. The 10th anniversary of its installation was celebrated at a ceremony on September 25th 2011, and George Nakashima was posthumously awarded an honorary designation as Academician of the Russian Academy of Arts – something which the Academy had never done before.

In the late 1990s, work had also started on the third Peace Table, the Peace Table for Asia. Some Aurovilians discussed with the executives of the Nakashima Foundation for Peace the possibility of Auroville hosting this Peace Table. The executives were interested – after all, George Nakashima had been a disciple of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother and the City for Human Unity was a suitable option. In 1995, a formal request for the donation of this Table was made. The Nakashima Foundation for Peace responded positively and agreed to donate both the Table and the transportation costs. The Peace Table for Asia was inaugurated in Auroville on 29 February 1996 – the day which the Mother has called ‘The Golden Day’, for on this day, in 1956, the manifestation of the Supramental took place upon earth.

But also this Table did not find a permanent home immediately. Initially it was intended to be the focal point of Auroville's Town Hall. That project did not materialize. In the meantime, the Centre for Indian Culture and the House of Mother's Agenda hosted it for some time, until it found a place in the Unity Pavilion. Here it awaited the completion of its own space, the Hall of Peace. On February 11, almost 18 years after it had been inaugurated in Auroville, the Peace Table for South Asia found its permanent home in this Hall of Peace.

The Hall of Peace, designed by Piero and Gloria, is a circular building attached to the Unity Pavilion. The Peace Table is the Hall's centre piece. The Table's true function will now begin: to serve as a focal point for conflict resolution in all its forms.

The Nakashima Foundation for Peace has meanwhile started fund-raising for the fourth Peace Table for Africa, which is intended for a room in the yet to be constructed Desmond Tutu Peace Centre in South Africa. The locations of the remaining Peace Tables are yet to be determined. Australia is being considered for the next one. The wood planks, cut at the same time as those for the first ones, are there and await the construction of the next Peace Table.

The Nakashima Foundation for Peace is not only interested in placing a Peace Table in each of the six continents, but is also open to the idea of placing mini Peace Tables in other countries, such as Israel and Japan. One such mini Peace Table has been installed – in the White House in Washington DC in the personal quarters of President Barack Obama and his family.

Carel

Auroville's Hall of Peace was inaugurated in a simple and elegant ceremony with Toshi Amagasu, the great-grandson of George Nakashima, assisted by Jaya, lighting a candle on the Peace Table for Asia. A banner showing Mother's signature – the Bird of Peace descending upon earth – which has been adopted by the Hall of Peace, decorated a wall. Members of the Nakashima Foundation for Peace, distinguished guests and Aurovilians addressed the densely-packed audience about the meaning and history of the Peace Table for Asia and its future in Auroville. The inauguration was concluded by an Indian and an African drumming on the Table.

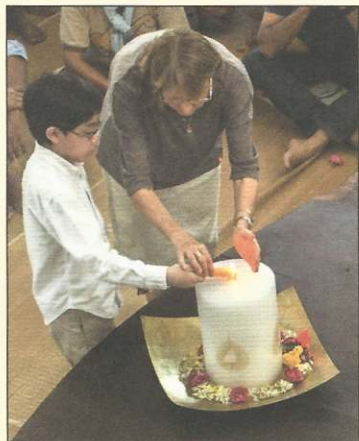


PHOTO: IRENO GUERCI

• **George Nakashima - a life sketch**  
• **Transparent or translucent? The crystal discussions**

page 2

• **Roger Toll reflects on Auroville**  
• **'Water being': an exploration in aquatic bodywork by Ireno**

pages 3-5

• **Exploring Auroville International**  
• **The perils and promises of the International Zone**

pages 6-7

• **Living Routes closes down**  
• **Audience turns performance**  
• **Vision Centre opens at Auroville**

pages 7-8



# George Nakashima

**G**eorge Katsutoshi Nakashima (May 24, 1905 – June 15, 1990) was a Japanese-American woodworker, architect, and furniture-maker, one of the leading innovators of 20th century furniture design and a father of the American Craft Movement. His work won him many awards and honours, including the Third Order of the Sacred Treasure from the Government and Emperor of Japan.

After studying architecture at the University of Washington and doing postgraduate architectural studies at MIT, George Nakashima worked in Japan at the architectural offices of Antonin Raymond. He was an American of Czech birth who had come to Japan to work with Frank Lloyd Wright on the Imperial Hotel, and had stayed on to set up his own practice, creating buildings that were a synthesis of modern architecture and traditional Japanese design.

In the mid 1930s, Raymond's office was awarded the design and construction project for Golconde in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. George volunteered to supervise the design and construction of the building. Drawn to Sri Aurobindo's teachings, he soon felt that he was receiving far more than he was able to give: "it was the answer to all my searches, finally conferring meaning to my life." He became a member of the Ashram and Sri Aurobindo in 1938 gave him the Sanskrit name of *Sundarananda*, which in English means 'One who delights in beauty'.

Of his life there, he said, "In a sense, I participated in life at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram during

its golden age, when all the disciples were in close touch with both the Mother and Sri Aurobindo. It was, in a way, an ideal existence on earth, without a trace of rancour or harsh words, arguments, egotism, but with all in concert in search of a divine consciousness. The way of life was perhaps as close to heaven on earth as possible."

Golconde was something of a do-it-yourself project – George acting as designer and general contractor, providing the architectural drawings, arranging for the construction equipment, raw materials, and designing the furniture. The railings, doors, cabinets, chairs, beds and tables were fashioned from great timber squares, sometimes two feet by two feet. "They were sawn by hand with a pit saw, which requires two men – one on the timber and one in the pit," recollected George. "It would often take half a day to cut a board. Furniture making at Pondicherry was an elemental baptism in the craft of woodworking."

However, in 1939, with the Second World War imminent, George felt the need to leave the security of the Ashram and venture back into the world. "As with all major questions, the Mother had the final say as to what my future was to be. When I finally decided that I wanted to leave, I

asked for her permission. She wrote her answer in the centre of a sheet of paper: 'yes,' in letters so small that I could barely read them."

He went back to the USA via Japan and subsequently married in 1941. But after the bombing of Pearl Harbour he, along with his wife and daughter, were incarcerated in a concentration

camp in Idaho in 1942. Yet, this seeming calamity was a blessing in disguise for in those harsh conditions he met a fine Japanese carpenter trained in Japan along traditional lines, and they joined forces. In 1943, he moved from the West Coast area to a farm Antonin Raymond owned in Pennsylvania – and that was the start of his life and work in New Hope.

What made his work unique is that, for George, every piece of furniture that left his workshop was an object of peace, intended to contribute to peace in the home. The tree, he said, has a second lease of life by being turned into furniture. The tree is a teacher, it has an aspiration, it is always in motion, but it is very slow – and at peace. Something of that is preserved in the furniture.

George came back to Pondicherry shortly before The Mother left her body. She looked at him and said, 'Sundarananda – you have come back. We knew you would come back.' She had never forgotten him.

Carel



PHOTO: COURTESY MIRA NAKASHIMA



The Arts Building at the Nakashima compound, which is looked after by the Nakashima Foundation for Peace

PHOTO: COURTESY MIRIAM CARPENTER

## Preserving the legacy

After an initial dip following the passing of George Nakashima, the furniture workshop is once again operating at full steam. Guided by his daughter Mira Nakashima and with a staff of 16, bookings for customised items of furniture have soared with delivery times exceeding eight months. Last year, Nakashima Woodworkers also had two successful shows in Toronto and Philadelphia. Most designs are in George's language, though there are differences, says Mira.

In addition to manifesting the Altars and Tables of Peace in each of the world's continents, the Nakashima Foundation for Peace is now also working to preserve the Nakashima compound in New Hope, Pennsylvania, as a heritage site, as the buildings designed and constructed by George Nakashima are very unusual. Three of the buildings are on the World Monument Fund Watch List for 2014 and work is proceeding to register the compound as a National Historical Monument which would help in raising funds for the preservation of the buildings and educating craftsmen in architectural preservation.

## MATRIMANDIR

**O**n two days in early February, in a private house in Arati community, Friend of Auroville Michael Bonke showed invited guests a number of different prototype globes of various diameters: a polished globe made from natural rock crystal; a polished globe made from glass; three sandblasted glass globes; and two sandblasted Plexiglass globes. He also showed different models of the square with the four symbols of Sri Aurobindo to support the globe, carved in a golden-orange coloured stone.

Michael has been closely involved with the building of the Matrimandir over the years and is concerned that the building exactly reflects The Mother's wishes. Projecting a ray of light on the globes from above and lighting them from below, he explained that these prototype globes had been made to better understand a conversation of The Mother, as recorded by Satprem in *Mother's Agenda*, of January 10, 1970.

In this conversation, describing the Inner Chamber of the Matrimandir, She had repeatedly said that the globe for the Matrimandir would be translucent. "And a globe not transparent but translucent. Then, at the bottom [of the globe] a light will be projected upward and will enter the globe diffusely. And from outside, rays of light will fall unto the centre. ... one day, I saw it like that, as I see you."

This conversation follows a few earlier conversations with Satprem in which She described the Chamber. On January 3 that year, She had spoken of "a globe possibly made of a transparent substance, with or without a light inside, but the sun will have to strike this globe ... sunlight must get in as a beam, not diffused." She adds, "And the important thing is the play of the sun on the centre. Because it becomes a symbol – the symbol of the future realization." In the same conversation she explained how the globe should be placed: "In the middle, on the floor, my symbol; at the centre of my symbol we will put, in four parts, (like a square), four symbols of Sri Aurobindo, upright, supporting a transparent globe. That has been seen."

As The Mother had also talked about the possibility that the four symbols of Sri Aurobindo could be made out of stone, Michael also studied that.

The presentation drew different responses, mainly focused on the globes. Some invitees liked their translucency. They felt that the transparent globe which is now situated in the Inner Chamber of the Matrimandir is 'cold' with the light passing through it, while the translucent globes, lighted from above and from below, were 'radiating sources of light, changing with the play of the descending ray'. They also expressed their unhappiness that they could see in the transparent globe people sitting opposite upside down.

Others objected. They experienced the translucent globes as 'light bulbs'. They also observed that such globes would not allow the ray of light from the heliostat on top of the Matrimandir to pass through and touch the lotus pond underneath. Moreover, would a translucent globe allow for 'the play of the sun on the centre'? This play is very visible now; and whenever a cloud passes the sun, the transparent globe turns at times translucent.

One of those who object is Piero Cicionesi, who was entrusted with the manifestation of the Inner Chamber. Pointing out that The Mother's views on the Matrimandir were continuously evolving, as is shown in *The Agenda* conversations, he is convinced that the choice made for the transparent globe was fully correct and is in accordance with The Mother's wishes. He explains:

"From the beginning of 1970 the Mother entrusted the architecture of the Matrimandir to Roger Anger. In a clarifying note, written in 1977, Roger gave many details of the process followed by him for the design, from the five different summary concepts he presented to the Mother at the end of March 1970, to the chosen concept in the spherical form as the Matrimandir was built. I helped from the middle of 1971 in defining and complementing all the drawings that were to be presented to the engineers in Madras, then followed the calculations made by them and proceeded by making the complicated working drawings to be used during the con-

## Transparent or translucent

struction of the RCC structure.

"At the end of January 1970, I was allowed to read the conversations between The Mother and Satprem on the Matrimandir in the type-written version that Satprem had prepared. But unfortunately, I was not permitted to make a photocopy. These texts only re-emerged at the end of 1973, and I then showed them to Roger who immediately distributed copies because they provided necessary explanations and complemented the sketch drawing that The Mother's disciple Udar had made at The Mother's instructions.

"Satprem's role in this design process was limited to being a temporary intermediary between the Mother, Italian architect Paolo (whose role with Mother actually ended at that time) and Roger. He had only four conversations with The Mother on the topic of the Matrimandir, all within an 18-day period (from 31.12.69 to 17.1.70). But the design process lasted three years. Roger consulted the Mother many times after January 17, 1970, submitting models and drawings. Additions and changes continued to be made and approved by Her.

"All evidence points to the fact that the Mother, from the very beginning, wanted the ray of light to pass through the symbols down to the earth underneath the Matrimandir, the ray itself becoming like the supporting axis of Matrimandir. It is a beautiful symbol inspired by Her and cannot be ignored.

"In 1977, Roger had written, in the personal note mentioned above: 'I had suggested to The Mother that the centre of the hall be left open under the symbol of The Mother and Sri Aurobindo so that the descending supramental force which would illuminate the ball, would also symbolically touch with its light the sheet of water situated at the level of the ground ... The Mother has given me the same day her full consent for the totality of the plans, after hav-

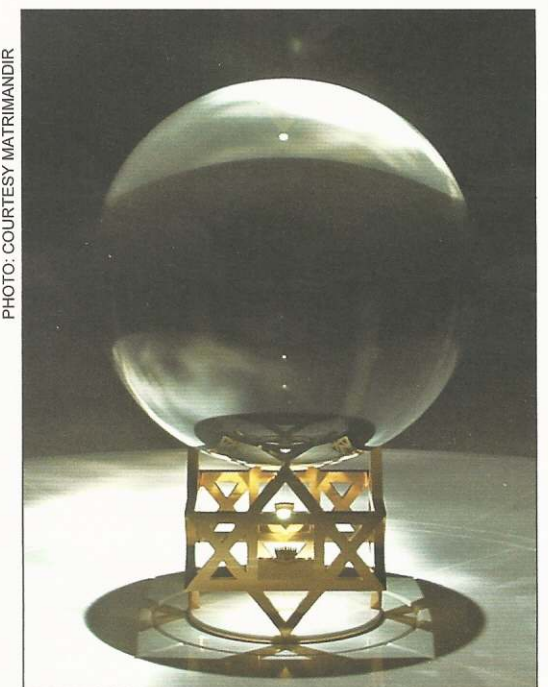


PHOTO: COURTESY MATRIMANDIR

ing received all the necessary explanations and the detailed information that She had asked from me."

"The first drawings of Roger, made in 1971, were showing all the symbols to be transparent (to be made out of a materials such as plexiglas), centrally situated on a three meter wide opening at the floor of the Chamber. I later reduced that to 35 centimetres, and then once again to only 5 centimetres, enough to let through a limited part (about one third) of the ray that had passed through the globe, to be focused to the pond underneath the Matrimandir. The rest of the ray gives light in the Chamber. The idea to lighten the globe with artificial light from below was never further considered by Roger or by me, because there was no need.



# Goodwill, maturity and the Yoga: reflections on Auroville

Roger Toll left Auroville in 1979 after eight years of living at Matrimandir and Certitude. Today he is a magazine editor and writer living in the United States. A regular visitor to Auroville, he was here in November-December last year. We asked him for his impressions.

**What was your overall impression after your recent visit?**

During these five weeks I sensed that the township is doing better than I have seen it before. The signs of success are everywhere. The Matrimandir, above all, is there. It is strong, the soul of Auroville, the city's engine, its essence, its heart. In addition, there is a new level of maturity: in its citizens, its buildings and infrastructure. More smiles meet you as you pass by on the road, and the "city" and green belt are more protected from buses and lorries; the city feels more peaceful. Children are everywhere, as ubiquitous as the now white-haired pioneer generation. Aurovilians seem to be living better than in the past: their roots seem deeper, their commitment greater. Many committees seem to be working well, with results and a will. The villages seem robust and wealthier and many female Tamilian Aurovilians I talked with seem happy, successful, more independent, more realized and, thus, valuable intermediaries between Auroville and the villages.

**How did you find the morale of the Aurovilians?**

First, I felt more warmth than ever before, but maybe that has to do with getting older and replaying the early days with an old colleague. But I felt perhaps even more frustration than during earlier visits. Two concerns were voiced so often they began sounding

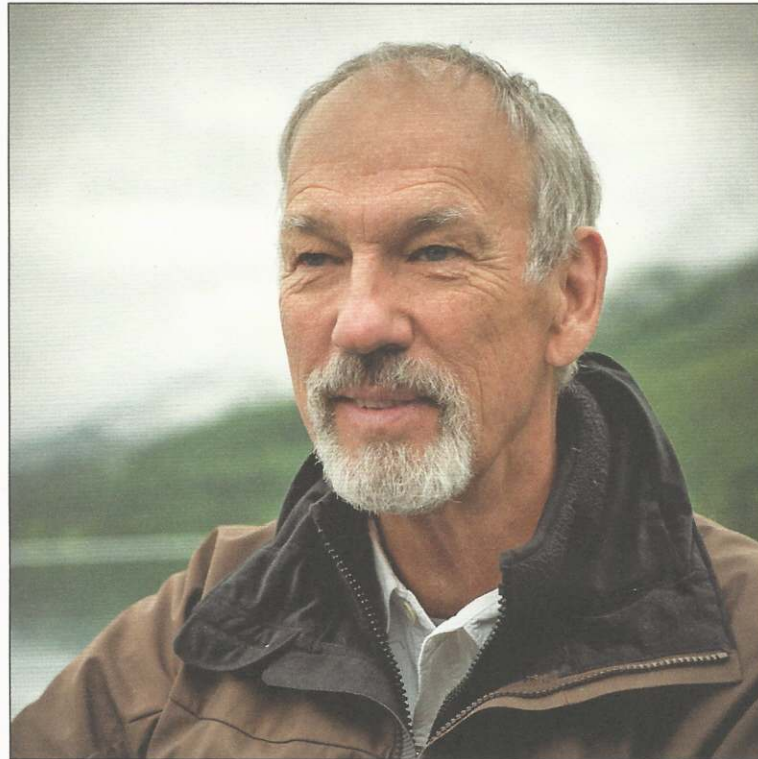
like mantras: "We're stuck, we're not moving forward," and "People are in positions for which they lack the capabilities to perform well."

I also sensed a lack of transparency at many levels. I had this ironic feeling that one of Auroville's earliest missions, afforestation, has been so successful that now it is hard to see what even your neighbours are doing. I mean that literally as well as figuratively. Homes are surrounded by fences of shrubbery and thorns, uninviting cow guards, metal gates you dare not open. People guard their lands as though they own them. Are Aurovilians more shut off to each other than ever before, I wondered. In the 1970s, I'd often walk from my home in Certitude in a straight line to Fertile, say, or Kottakarai, or Aspiration. That straight line was a symbol for what we did have in those days: abundant transparency in everything we did. You could see forever, and you knew what everyone was doing.

Transparency is a key word in organizational thinking these days, and it's an ideal in politics. People and organizations are transparent when they have nothing to hide, when they are open to change and evolution, when they see that growth through adaptation is a law of nature. It should be a central concept in Auroville, but I don't think it is.

**Why do you think this is?**

In part it's the situation vis-à-vis the Government of India, but it's also something else.. Aurovilians agree that we have to move forward. Then... clunk! a steel door shuts. "Oh, if only X would do what I think... if only Y wouldn't be so possessive!" I saw the play of totally human forces: ego, possessiveness, territory, power, money, even ownership in a town of no ownership, played out in a small but significant arena of what is meant to be an



Roger Toll

intentionally-conscious community which is dedicated, above all, to moving beyond those same human forces.

**These 'totally human' forces' seem to have been around for a long time.**

Yes, they are the same issues Sri Aurobindo criticized in his letters to sadhaks in the Ashram and they are the same road blocks hindering Auroville's growth that I saw, in a much cruder form, back in the 1970s. Mother and Sri Aurobindo laid out, very clearly and repeatedly, what is involved in getting Auroville moving... yet it's so difficult that we seem still to be in the first steps of the Yoga.

I wonder if Aurovilians are reading and digesting Sri Aurobindo. *The Human Cycle* and *The Ideal of Human Unity*, in particular, are crucial to understanding Auroville. Sri Aurobindo is

clear. The only thing that can build such a dream as Auroville is the spiritualization of society: "an inner change is needed in human nature... if this is not the solution, then there is no solution." If there is no solution this time around, he says, it has to wait until a "greater race" comes, a form of life "nearer to the divine." Are we destined to miss our chance this time? I hope not.

**Do you have any practical suggestions of how we can move forward?**

I don't live here, so it's hard for me to preach. You can't understand much in five weeks. But I had a few strong feelings from conversations with old and new friends.

Firstly, the Galaxy design. It holds yantric power but that does not mean it is cast in stone, never to be questioned or modified in its details. The city is

organic. The only way is to move forward with flexibility, toleration, compromise and goodwill. Things can and will be rebuilt.

As for community decision-making, put deadlines on discussions. Find out how to legislate ways to bypass blockage so that they become accepted procedure. However, there has to be something better, more fitting to the Dream, than elections.

Constitute committees with people who are most capable of fulfilling the needs of that committee. The first priority is to select people who will do the work involved, who have a professional attitude and are full of goodwill to find middle ways of solving problems. They should have the attitude of civil servants who represent the community as a whole, not of politicians who represent particular interests and positions.

New Delhi has been crucial in Auroville's development. The same attention paid to Delhi over several decades should now be made to creating close relations with and honest respect for all levels of the state government. This is crucial.

Non-Tamil Aurovilians need to learn and use Tamil to create real interchange between people. Get acquainted with the culture. The true integration of the villages and Auroville has been one of the town's greatest challenges since the earliest days, and it still remains a challenge. Respect, honesty, transparency are crucial.

**Are you optimistic about the future of Auroville?**

Below the frustration Aurovilians feel, I saw growth, progress and goodwill. Among many, the Dream is alive, there is faith in the future. But everyone needs to keep feeding that fire, that fundamental aspiration at the heart of Auroville.

Roger Toll

## MATRIMANDIR

## What? The crystal discussions

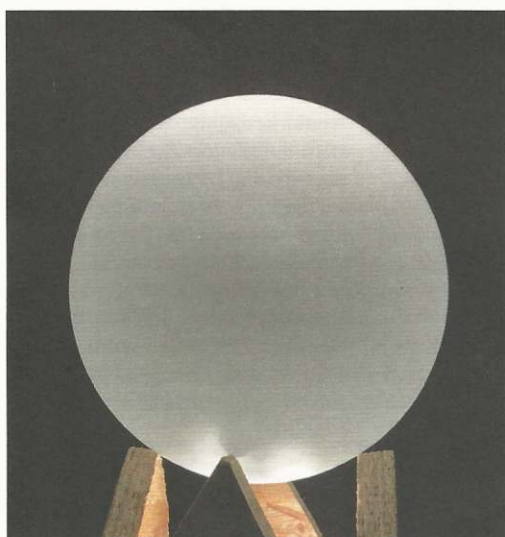


PHOTO: COURTESY MICHAEL BONKE

**Left: the transparent crystal globe on its stand in the Inner Chamber of the Matrimandir, lighted by the ray of light from the heliostat on top of the Matrimandir. Above: prototype of a translucent globe, lighted from top and below.**

"In the 1980s, Roger defined which persons would be responsible for the different part of the work, such as the outer and inner skin, the ramps, the discs, the petals and the gardens. I was entrusted with all the work related to the Inner Chamber. Roger asked me to fulfil two conditions: a) I would show him and get his approval of my preliminary drawings and models, which would include the symbols of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo, the transparent globe and the ray continuing below the floor. b) He would entrust the inner chamber only to me (no interferences). I was glad to accept and fulfil these conditions.

"When the question came up how to make the globe we considered all possibilities: hollow or solid,

in glass or in plastic. It became apparent that a transparent globe was the best and only choice that had the requisite quality for allowing the ray of light to pass through. After a long search with many top companies specialising in crystal glass it became obvious that only two German firms would be able to jointly make the globe. The firm of Schott in Mainz had the capacity to cast the globe to perfection, without any thread or ribbon-like inclusions or air bubbles. The firm of Zeiss in Germany would then polish the cast to a fully transparent globe of exactly 70 centimetres diameter, as had been approved by The Mother.

"In 1983-84, a study was done by Zeiss to assess the thermal impact of the sun beam from the heliostat on the globe. In June 1985, after visiting Zeiss, the decision was taken to go for a transparent optical globe. Auroville International then started the fundraising campaign and many people made donations. In August that year, Auroville International placed the order. The globe was delivered in June, 1988. But as the Inner Chamber was not ready, it remained in storage at Zeiss till April 1991, when it arrived in Auroville. On August 15, the Chamber was opened for concentration." [see also *AVToday* #31, August 1991]. After a few days, on August 22, the globe was installed on a prototype stand with the four Sri Aurobindo symbols. In view of the weight of the globe of around 450 kilograms, it was later decided to make the stand in gold-plated stainless steel as stone would not have been able to carry the weight.

"Ever since, the Crystal Globe has been an object for concentration for thousands of people. Roger Anger, who passed away on January 15, 2008, never raised any objection to the transparency of the globe, nor ever mentioned to me that he wished it to be replaced by a translucent one."

One of those who visited Zeiss in 1985 was the late Ruud Lohman. In his collected essays on the

Matrimandir, published in the book *A House for the Third Millennium*, he gives his views on the meaning of the Matrimandir and of the globe. He compares the structure of the Matrimandir with its central rings at various levels to the *chakras*, the centres of consciousness in the subtle body. Then, introducing a text of Sri Aurobindo, *The Seven Suns of the Supermind*, where a description is given how each of the *chakras* is illuminated by a descending ray of supramental truth, he explains why the descent of the light cannot stop at the globe, the symbol of the heart *chakra*. "The descent does not stop at the heart-lotus, with the psychic. It is a basic fact that the highest touches the lowest, from the Sun to the mud of the Inconscient. In fact, this touch-down might well seem to be the most important, for without the mud beneath glowing up, the world would never change... the Supramental Light has to penetrate the very soil and a seed has to be sown."

Commenting on The Mother's statement that the play of the sun on the centre is the symbol of the future realization he writes, "An interplay takes place between two elements, an inter-penetration... a single ray of sunlight descending sword-like straight down, deep, deep into it, illuminating it from above, from within, from below. Not an unilluminated particle. Total transparency, absolute purity, thorough transmission..."

"One might wonder - and many do - why we don't put a natural crystal in the centre, in the light of the Ray. Natural crystal is alive, it breathes, it communicates, it has a degree of consciousness... Although natural crystal seems obvious and more symbolic, everything is pointing in the direction of man-made crystal. One begins to see why. Matrimandir as the highest aspiration of humanity to the light is the very thirst of Matter for the Light of the Lord. In simple lines, in an extreme soberness of symbols (no altar, no music, no pictures, no incense, no flowers) it expresses this openness to the light. At its very core, in its exact centre, it offers up a species of matter, man-made matter, which more than any other material is transparent to the light, receptive, 'surrendered.' Light passes through, if not fully, then

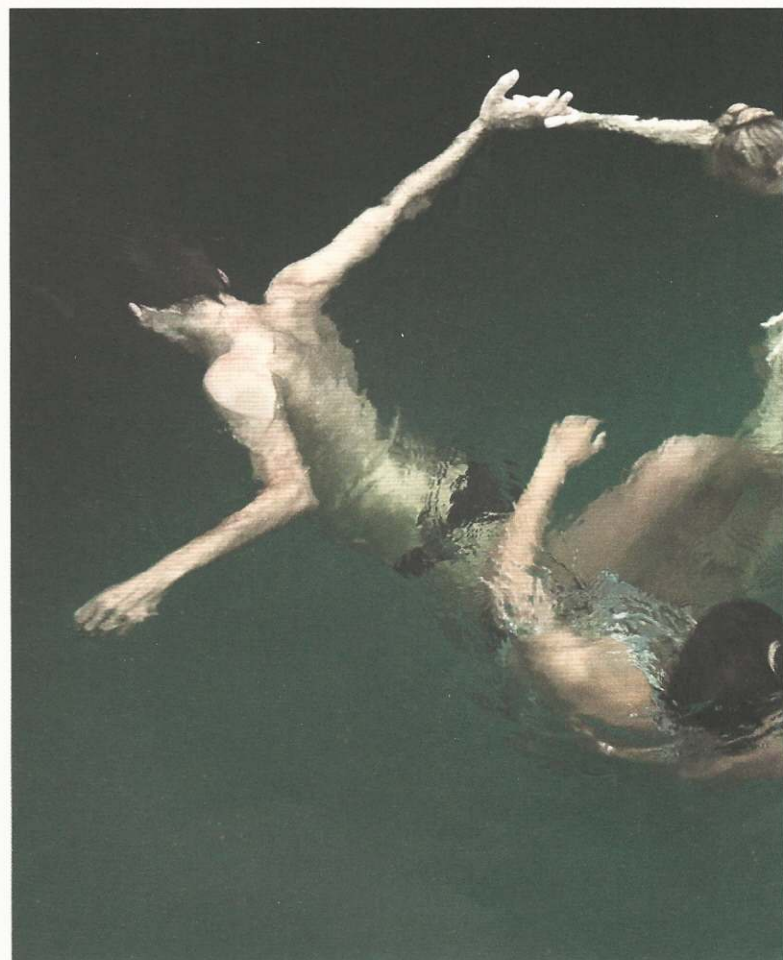
as close to one hundred percent as any matter can reach. In this manner it is the perfect material to represent the hearts and souls and bodies of each one of us, the deepest aspiration of humankind and the earth to the Divine. This is Nature at her highest, purest; this is the Earth-Mother totally surrendered, totally transparent... The sun is a symbol, one of the most powerful of symbols, representing life from on high, the heavens, the realms of the Divine. It is the Lord smiling down on us, giving life, giving health, giving joy... Matrimandir in its simple symbol shows His Presence as a continuous outpouring of Light, and it only depends on our individual and collective receptivity how much of Him we can absorb... To become the pure crystal without even one bubble of ego, and simultaneously, be, feel, live the Ray."

The discussions in Auroville have started. Some say that the important thing is not what the crystal looks like, but that the Matrimandir, as has been stated by The Mother, should not become a religion, and that Her words on the Matrimandir should not be religiously interpreted. Others state that the crystal has been charged since it has been installed and should never be replaced. Then there are those who quote The Mother's saying that the Matrimandir is under direct guidance of the Divine: would the Divine have allowed a transparent crystal to be installed if a translucent one had been intended?

Michael believes that it would be possible for the ray of light to pass through the translucent globe, which would answer one of the objections. In order to conclude his explorations, he has ordered two globes of 70 centimetre diameter to be made, one of natural quartz crystal, the other one of glass which will be sandblasted. These globes are expected to arrive in Auroville around August this year. The executives of the Matrimandir, aware that even the research into the creation of a different type of globe for the Inner Chamber is a sensitive subject, have decided that the next step will be to put up a demonstration of these two globes for all the community to see, in a space close to the Matrimandir, possibly in one of the petal meditation rooms, but not in the Inner Chamber.

Carel





## 'Water Being': exploring

**T**he Unity Pavilion recently hosted a new photographic exhibition by Ireno entitled 'Water Being'. The exhibition, which was partly funded by Stichting de Zaaier, displayed work from an ongoing project to document aquatic-bodywork at Quiet Healing Centre.

These photographs portray a different world. A world where borders dissolve, water merges with light, body with body, as they take on new, sinuous shapes in this ever-changing environment. The expressions on the 'water faces', too, speak of something else: of inwardness, surrender, bliss.

'Water Being', as the title suggests, is also about a different way of being. It is as if the element of water has released individuals from their normal 'land-locked' selves, enabling them to return to an essential state of pure being and oneness with others. As Jacques Cousteau put it, "From birth, man carries the weight of gravity on his shoulders. He is bolted to earth. But man has only to sink beneath the surface and he is free."

"The water is a dissolver; all kinds of contact are easier in the water," explains Ireno. "I was amazed to see how the water broke down barriers between the participants who were able, in a very short time, to reach a deep level of intimacy and closeness by surrendering themselves to this element and, most importantly, by deeply caring for one another."

Images of surrender, care and oneness: it's not difficult to understand why this exhibition received such

enthusiastic responses from Aurovilians. Ireno feels it is good for us as a community to see this. "It's a kind of documentation of our progress towards human unity, a confirmation that on many levels it is happening, even if we don't often see it. Little did I know when I embarked on this journey that it would be so enriching, that I would become a privileged witness to some of the most profound, intimate soul-touching moments that I could ever have imagined."

That journey began almost 15 years ago when Ireno saw one person supporting another in the pool of the Quiet Healing Centre. He took a few shots with a small digital camera. When he viewed the pictures later he was immediately attracted by something in them.

Some years later, Harold Dull, the creator of Watsu ('water shiatsu') came to Auroville to run some workshops. Ireno asked him if he could take pictures. At first Harold was reluctant, but then he agreed. When he saw the pictures he was impressed. "He told me that if I planned to make a book one day he would be happy to write poems to go with the photos. So that was an open door for me: I was accepted."

Ireno reckons he has taken almost 40,000 shots on this theme over the last three years. Why so many? "As the medium is so fluid, there are always new expressions, new images: Harold Dull describes Watsu as 'poems in water'. Once or twice I thought I had got almost everything, but then I discovered another







## ing aquatic bodywork

Ireno was recently awarded the prestigious "LericiPea" – Ligurian Poets and Artists in the World 2014 prize for his photographic work in Auroville, including his recent 'Water Being' project which used photography, video and installation. If you would like further information about the 'Water Being' book project, contact [ireno@auroville.org.in](mailto:ireno@auroville.org.in)

aquatic practice – and there are many different ones being used in Quiet – which showed me a side I had not yet seen."

As an example, he mentions a visiting teacher who began to work with larger groups in the water. Ireno was amazed by the new visual and emotional content. "The movements of the individuals in the water are completely free, but there are moments when the flux turns into synergies and all the bodies are linked in some way, twenty people becoming one entity."

Sometimes those 'synergies' seem archetypal. Ireno points to a photo in the exhibition. It shows many people in the water at the same time. Those in the lower part seem struggling, "but at the top one figure seems to be ascending, as if liberated from the struggles of life."

He indicates other 'archetypal' images. In one, the guide seems to be guiding the recipient through a gate of light. In another, four women and a man support the prone form of Louis in an almost exact transcription of famous images of Christ's deposition from the Cross.

Ireno admits that the choice of subjects may reflect his classical Italian train-

ing. He often sees forms which remind him of Renaissance paintings. "But I also think water 'releases' these archetypal images because it returns us to essentials."

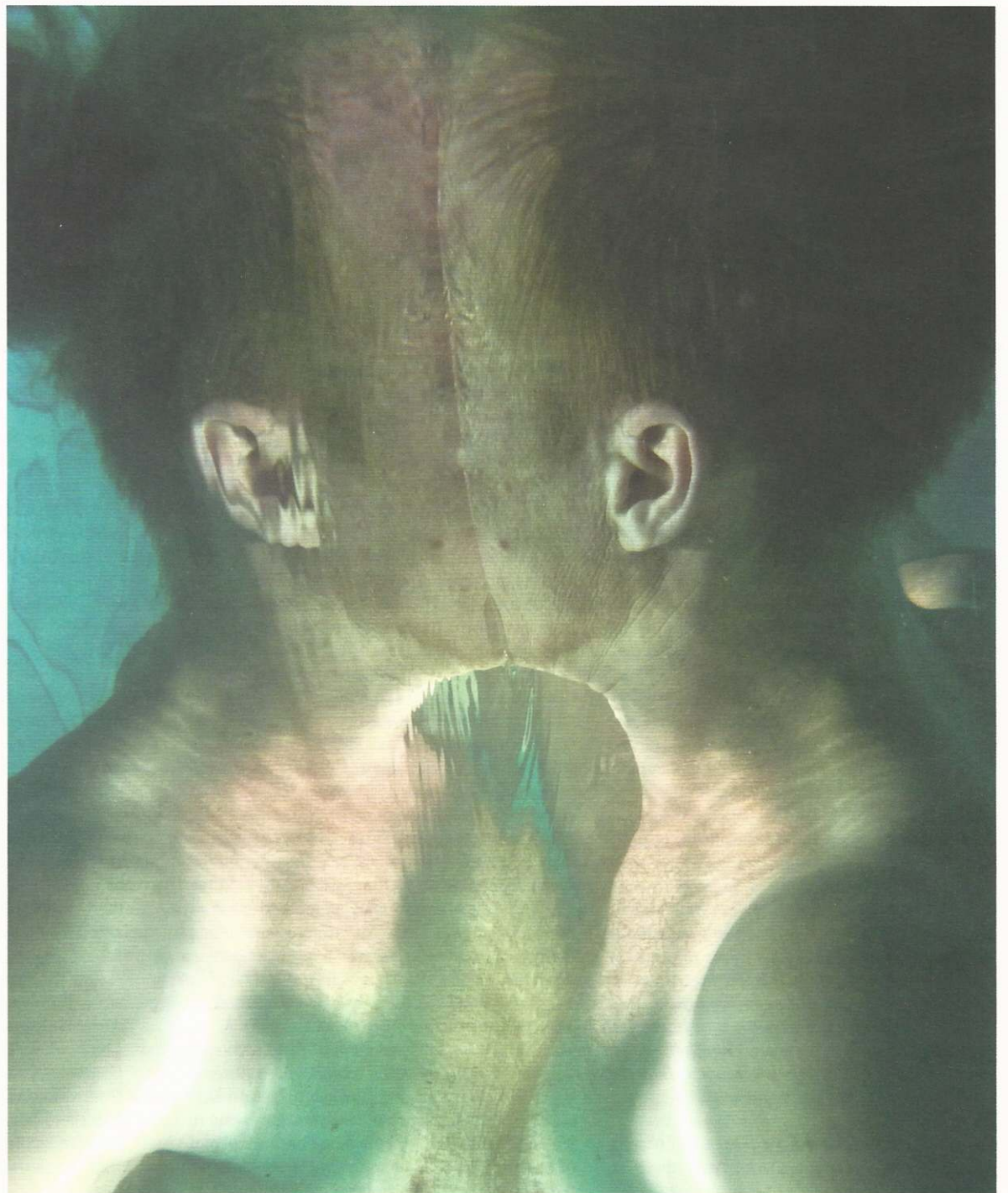
What were the particular challenges Ireno faced? Did he have to develop new techniques, approaches, to document this work?

Ireno says that when he went to take the first pictures, it was "as if I was entering a sanctuary. I had to be sure not to make any 'waves' around me." At the same time, he couldn't be just an observer; he had to become part of what was happening. "This means that at times, when something particularly powerful was happening in the water, I also became emotionally involved." Technically, Ireno also had to deal with the challenges posed by the extreme reflectivity of water. He began by using a polarising filter to eliminate reflections, but then he felt something important was missing, so learned to allow or eliminate reflections according to his intuition and to the subject-matter.

Ireno would like to make a book based upon the work he has done so far. "I see these practices as a potential vehicle for helping human consciousness on its journey towards expansion and transformation. The book, by documenting this research, could be a valuable ambassador of the work we are doing in Auroville."

Harold Dull has agreed to write the introduction as well as poems to accompany the images. "Now all we need to do," says Ireno, "is to secure funding."

Alan





# Exploring Auroville International

The Auroville International (AVI) Centres held their biannual meeting in Auroville in February. After the meetings, some members of the new Board met with Auroville Today to discuss how they perceive their role, the main challenges facing them, and their hopes for the future. Friederike and Isa are board members of AVI-Germany; Bryan is Chairperson of AVI-USA; Vikas is Chairperson of AVI-UK; Alfonso is Chairperson of AVI-Spain; Camille is a member of AVI-Switzerland; and Jürgen is the liaison for AVI-Ireland.

*Are you irritated that some Aurovilians still see AVI's role as being simply a funding agency for Auroville projects?*

**Camille:** At our last meeting in Auroville, two years ago, I felt we were very much looked upon like this. Many projects were presented to us but at the end there was always a request for financial help. But this year it is completely different. There is more a feeling that people want to share with us what they are doing: the money aspect no longer comes first.

**Isa:** This is part of a larger acceptance of AVI in Auroville. Before, the feeling was "You're only here to give money" but this year, in particular, we felt very welcome.

**Friederike:** I think the many volunteers who are coming here with the help of the Centres have changed this attitude. They have helped Aurovilians understand that we are also there to help rejuvenate Auroville through bringing these young people here, who will then go out and spread the word and give an ever broader basis for Auroville.

*One of your other main functions through the years has been to give information about Auroville. How do you go about communicating such a complex entity as Auroville?*

**Friederike:** In a recent meeting, the Working Committee said they are very concerned that we should not propagate a too idealistic version of Auroville. I describe it as a laboratory, pointing out that Auroville is a representation of all problems in the world and we cannot expect it to be ideal yet.

**Jürgen:** I say it is an experiment. The Aurovilians are 2000 guinea-pigs in a big cage, and they run around and that's the starting point for interesting things to happen.

**Isa:** Actually, we cannot really tell people what Auroville is; they have to experience it. And each person who comes here has a different Auroville experience. All we can say is that the ideal has not yet manifested completely, but we appreciate that there are people here who are really working for human unity.

**Vikas:** I am very careful not to give any false hopes. The only real hope of Auroville is that people are trying, and that people here still believe that the answer to the world's problems is a change of consciousness.

**Friederike:** But the communication is not just one way. Mother and Sri Aurobindo's action is not restricted to Auroville and to India. It is a worldwide action, and the world is developing in a way that sometimes appears to be more advanced than what is happening in Auroville. So I think another of our roles is to bring this knowledge of advanced developments here.

**Bryan:** And Auroville is everywhere too. Some of us are very much involved with concrete activities in our own communities which further similar ideals to those of Auroville. For example, I and my wife are both involved with the peace and justice network in the U.S. and are volunteering in a seniors centre and free health clinic.

*This reminds me that in 1978 Satprem wrote a letter to the Canadian Association in which he says that 'Auroville makes sense only in so far as all of us, in every country, can house the spirit of Auroville in ourselves... It is not the Auroville over there which is the most important, it is Auroville wherever you are - in your heart first of all, in your own experience.' In other words, Auroville is everywhere where you live the 'Auroville spirit'. Do you relate to this?*

**Alfonso:** Very much so. In our different countries we have decided to be Aurovilians, to live as Aurovilians.

**Friederike:** Perhaps this is the part of our work which is least understood by those Aurovilians, who tend to see us only a funding agency or a means of giving active help. This quote by Satprem says it very well.

**Isa:** I think what we have done in AVI over the years is to create a network beyond nations. We're establishing a friendship beyond national and cultural appearances, based on trust in each other. In this way, we are creating this feeling of being Aurovilians outside of Auroville. At the beginning I felt we had to manifest things, and I got frustrated when nothing much happened, but then I felt it was much more important to get to know each other beyond our surface differences.

helping us. We're just at the beginning of this, but we enjoy working together and a creative flow has started. Now we dream of opening an Auroville café. Maybe in this way we can attract young people who are looking for something practical like this, because the Sri Aurobindo Centre in Berlin is a bit 'holy' for them - a place where you sit and meditate and read *Savitri*.

**Friederike:** Although we do organize our meetings in a different way; we don't sit endlessly. Isa's daughter, Muna, has great skills in facilitating meetings in a very lively and playful way, which young people can really relate to.

**Jürgen:** In Auroville, Sadhana Forest has no problem in attracting youngsters. They are happy

wanted. These contacts have to be strengthened. But to reach out on the level of governments and other official agencies we need clarity. We have to work out, together with the Auroville groups concerned, a concrete development plan and, based on that, prepare appropriate material with which to present our plans.

**Isa:** One of our aims is to broaden the network of like-minded people round the world. This is why we have produced a book about AVI, to let people know that there are people out in the world who are Aurovilians at heart. We want them to join with us and work together for Auroville, as well as working on the consciousness in their own countries.

**Bryan:** In AVI-USA we are making a big push to make Aurovilians more aware of what is happening in AVI-USA. We've have just brought out the first issue of 'AVI-USA Connect' to help in this.

*Would it be fair to say that AVI suffered a little bit in the past from a certain inferiority complex vis-à-vis Auroville? And maybe now you are coming to a point where you feel you can start leading Auroville in certain areas?*

**Vikas:** I very much feel that; I think AVI can take a much more leading role. Some people living in Auroville have got worn down, burnt out, by the combative process here but we are not subject to that. This gives us a degree of freedom and the energy to agitate for the things we think need to be worked on and changed. Of course, we need to find the right way to do this. But we would like to be a partner in helping Auroville move on, rather than us simply standing on the sidelines and providing funding.

**Alfonso:** I agree, and we have shown we can do it. We were very active in organizing the recent rededication ceremony for the International Zone, and we made a very fast decision to fund a new well in the Zone.

**Friederike:** There were very few Aurovilians at the ceremony, but we had the feeling that something really beautiful happened there; it was such a concentrated atmosphere. I think the first step in getting things moving here is to create an energy field, to call in a different energy to take hold of the thing and guide it, and that is what we in AVI have helped with.

**Vikas:** That ceremony had such strength for me. It was as if we uncovered what was already there, our essential unity. What we didn't do, and what I had wanted us to do, was to allow everyone to express their feelings of what wants to come down for the International Zone. I think this is where AVI could play an important role, using the skills of people who can meditate to see if we can't come up with an integrated solution to how to proceed in this Zone. Because it's one thing to have a ceremony, but we still have to decide whose pavilion goes where and what they are going to build.

At the meeting in Berlin we had decided that after all the talk the essential thing would be to physically do something. When we had that recent meeting in the Unity Pavilion when everybody quite spontaneously said they would put money towards this well, I really felt the *shakti* power at that moment. This is the way we should go.

*From an interview by Alan*



Front row (from left) Friederike, Alfonso, Vikas, Isa. Back row (from left) Jürgen, Camille, Bryan

*It seems that the membership of many Centres is stagnating, and the members predominantly belong to the older generation. Is this a worrying trend for you?*

**All:** Yes.

**Camille:** We cannot find new people, young people. In our small association we are all in our 50s and 60s. The young people don't want to commit themselves because they have too many other things to be interested in.

*What could be done to change this?*

**Vikas:** We are already working on this in AVI-UK. At the last meeting, before our long-term secretary Martin Littlewood left to join Auroville, he organized the involvement of his own son as well as Angiras, who was born in Auroville. Angiras is planning to contact Aurovillian youngsters who are now living in the UK and get them involved. But there is a very practical issue here - they don't want to sit around and listen to a lot of blablabla. They want to do something else, not knowing quite what that is. And we don't know what it is, either!

**Alfonso:** Young people want experience, not responsibility. What they're really interested in is to come to Auroville and experience something here, not to be part of any organization or to go to meetings.

**Friederike:** I think it has something to do with two very different generations. Our generation who came out of 1968 wanted to fight for a better world. Our children don't need that, they don't want to fight. One of them told me, 'We are not fighters, we are lovers'. So they are happy to stay closely linked with their network of friends and family, whereas we wanted to run away and do our own thing. Today it is a different situation for the youth. They feel they are left with a mess in the world and they have to struggle more to get their things together. So they focus more on building their private networks because this supports them when times are hard.

**Camille:** They have a different mentality. They share much more than we did.

**Isa:** There are quite a number of young people, volunteers, who have been to Auroville and come back. They don't necessarily want to be members of AVI but they have new ideas, and they want to work for Auroville. AVI-Germany has a small plot of land which is meant for growing vegetables, and these young people have been coming there and

to go there, to be told what to do and work hard.

**Bryan:** It's because it is like the early Auroville, the pioneering Auroville. Interestingly, in the US we have more money coming in for Sadhana Forest than for any other single project. It comes in hundreds of small donations from people who have lived and worked there.

**Camille:** They are attracted to a project like Sadhana Forest because it is like many small movements in the world which are exploring other ways of living which are 'degrowth', not consumeristic.

*Do you see any need to give a new direction to AVI?*

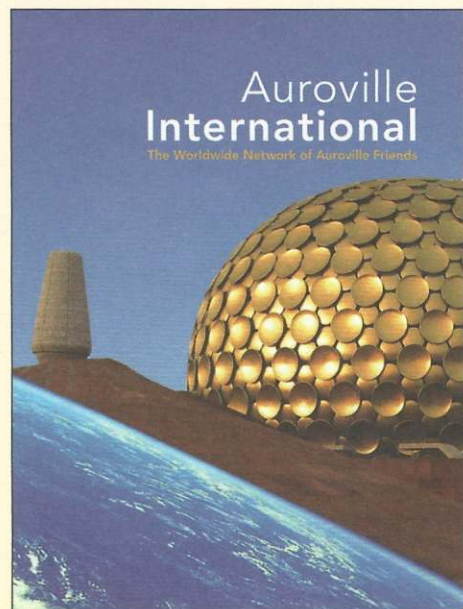
**Alfonso:** We need to change. In this we are in a very similar position to Auroville itself, because we are the same body. But in what way should we change? I don't know. I think we need to call upon Her for help.

**Friederike:** The International Zone is very important to us and here AVI needs to become stronger, more proactive and more concrete. We've made a first decision to fund a well there. We have also developed first links with government agencies, which is what Mother explicitly

## NEW BOOKS

This book has been created to answer the question often heard, "What is Auroville International?" and to give an idea about the work and function of this worldwide network of Auroville friends "out there". Some of the most active members of the Auroville International Association have shared their stories, including what brought them to Auroville, what touches them about Auroville and the Aurovilians, and why they came involved in the work for AVI. We in AVI hope to inspire the reader to join or collaborate with our network for the benefit of Auroville's further development!

The book will be available at the Visitors Center in Auroville and can be ordered from [vani@auroville.org.in](mailto:vani@auroville.org.in). Price in India Rs 850, abroad € 10 or US \$ 14. Prices exclude mailing costs.





# The perils and promises of the International Zone

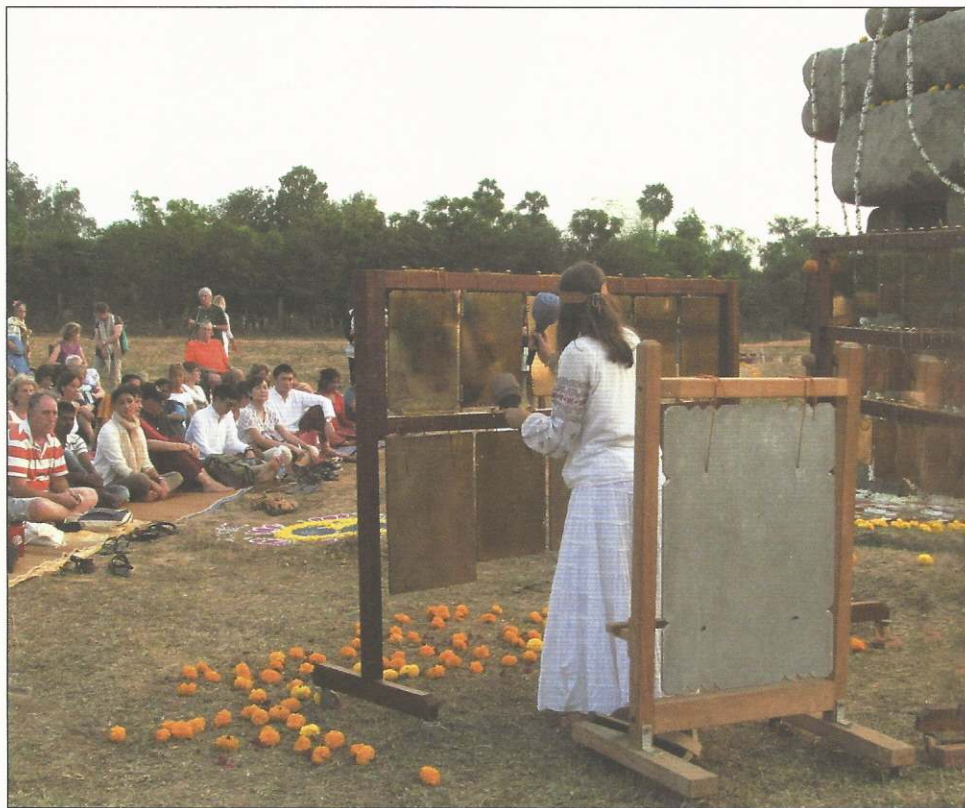
In the spirit of 'Unity in diversity', Auroville International (AVI) invited all AVI members and Aurovilians on 15th February to a walking tour through the International Zone and a re-dedication of the Zone in an effort to rekindle its development.

The International Zone (IZ) is one of the major focus areas of Auroville International. The walk through the Zone was a logical extension of the AVI meeting, so that the AVI members could see for themselves the new initiatives and become aware of the struggles and challenges facing the Zone.

One of the important challenges is encroachment by villagers. The IZ has an area of more than 30 hectares (74 acres), is still largely undeveloped, unused, and unfenced, and so is an open invitation to encroachment. This problem was brought into vivid relief by the construction of two huts on the day before the walk on *paramboke* land [village commons land] that lies within the IZ. The huts were built by some residents of Edaiyanchavadi, which is located at a significant distance from site, with the support of its *panchayat* [village government], and is a provocative challenge to Auroville and to another village which is claiming the land as their *paramboke*. The authorities have been quickly and vigorously responding. But encroachment by villages within the IZ is a widespread and long-term problem.

As we walked the land, its vastness and lack of development became evident. Among our first encounters, set within a beautiful field surrounded with lovely trees, was a cement block, about one cubic foot in size, with the words *Pavillon de France* inscribed on the top, and dated 1993. A bit further, we stopped at a small tree, which we learned had once been run over by a tractor and then replanted, which marks the site of what is supposed to become the German Pavilion. These are vivid symbols of the stagnation that has troubled the IZ. These two countries, which have the most nationals in Auroville with the exception of India, have not managed to erect even a preliminary pavilion. We also visited a tree-house, a temporary and rudimentary structure, which at least is a living presence for a future African Pavilion. Four young men, from different African nations, addressed the group and spoke of their aspirations and challenges, including the lack of water. Later, we stopped at a grassy field where two shipping containers are being turned into residences for Krupa and Petra and Tom. They will help contribute to the work of the IZ and provide a presence on the land to help prevent further encroachment.

Why this stagnation, I wondered. B. suggested one factor was dysfunction within L'Avenir, Auroville's Town Planning Department, and with town planning in general, which has stymied the efforts of various countries to begin projects within the zone. He cited as one example the case of the American Pavilion. After all the fundraising and collaborative efforts which went into constructing it, the planners decided it was in the wrong place and it was renamed International House. However, B. added that in some cases L'Avenir has responded to initiatives and enabled



Vera performing on the Russian Bells at the site of the Canadian pavilion next to the Inuksuk



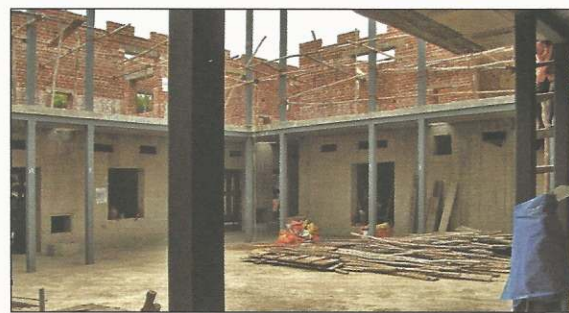
Foundation stone of the French pavilion



Krupa's container house in the International Zone

useful projects to move forward, including his own recent efforts to dig a well which will provide badly needed water to several people and sites within the IZ. We visited the marker of this well, which he expects to be dug within a few weeks.

Further on, we stopped at the construction site of the impressive new Auroville Language Laboratory and Tomatis Therapy Centre, a welcome sign of vitality within the IZ. Mita explained something of its *raison d'être* and its innovative construction techniques. The limestone structure, a traditional building material



The courtyard of the upcoming Language Laboratory



The Centre of Indian Culture (under construction)

with durable and ecologically friendly qualities, has been further enhanced by the introduction of certain microorganisms which provide greater breathability and longevity. As someone remarked, "the walls are literally alive." We visited one of the rooms which already had its attractive grey-gold coat of limestone plaster which requires no paint. The large building, which has many innovative building features, was centred around a central courtyard. Its ground floor will have classrooms for learning

languages, and the upper floor will have rooms for research and application of the Tomatis method, a ground-breaking type of therapy which stimulates the language centres of the brain. The Tomatis method facilitates language learning, ostensibly cutting the time to learn roughly in half, and also is used to treat autism and various psychological disorders. The learning of languages is fundamental to maintaining both the diversity and unity of Auroville, and thus is appropriately situated in the IZ.

The next stop on our journey was in the courtyard between Bharat Nivas, Sri Aurobindo Auditorium and the upcoming Centre for Indian Culture. Aster Patel explained that Bharat Nivas, the Indian Pavilion, was started by the Mother in 1971, and represents one of only two existing pavilions within the IZ. (The other, situated nearby, is the Pavilion of Tibetan Culture.) The building now under construction for the Centre for Indian Culture was another impressive two-storey structure. The building will house a large hall for talks and presentations, smaller multi-purpose rooms for workshops, offices and other uses, and a library focusing on Indian Culture. The shady courtyard between the buildings will serve as a convenient outdoor spillover space for all three of the surrounding buildings.

Finally, we came to the construction site of the Tamil Heritage Centre, where its massive underground foundation has just been laid. Long-term Aurovillian Meenakshi, social worker and Tamil poet and author, addressed the group about the project, which she predicted would take about three years to complete. The 3000 sq. meter building will house a conference hall, multipurpose hall, galleries, theatre, library and office. There will also be an outdoor amphitheatre, mandapam and lotus pond. It will be a centre for learning and communicating many aspects of Tamil culture, including its arts, philosophy, architecture and spirituality.

Given that the Indian government is funding the three substantial projects underway in the IZ, it seems evident that one major factor holding back development of the national pavilions is the lack of funding and involvement from their national governments.

In the evening, there was a re-dedication ceremony of the IZ at the Canadian Inuksuk monument. The ceremony, beautifully conducted under the setting sun in front of the five-metre high granite structure shaped like a man, included a reading of the Mother's words on the importance of the Zone in various languages, a performance on the "Russian bells" by Vera and later by representatives of the countries attending the function, and it was followed by a bonfire sharing circle.

Larry

## Living Routes closes down

Living Routes, the non-profit study-abroad organization from the USA which had been sending university students to Auroville, Findhorn and other ecovillages for the past 15 years, closed down in January this year. By the end of March, Living Routes (USA) will legally dissolve as a non-profit organization. In Auroville, this not only means no more Living Routes students visiting, learning from and contributing to Auroville, but also Living Routes-Auroville as a project under the unit Auroville International Programme will also cease.

Living Routes is closing down because it lost the academic accreditation from the University of Massachusetts for all the programmes it was due to host in the current Spring

2014. The university cited concerns about Living Routes' response to a health and safety situation that occurred during the Fall 2013 programme in Costa Rica. While the revoking of academic accreditation was, from the perspective of the university, merely a suspension for one semester, the loss of income from the Spring semester meant that Living Routes could not financially survive.

Living Routes was unique in many ways. It believed in experiential education that sought to bring about transformation in individuals in the context of ecovillages or alternative communities seeking to be sustainable. The Auroville programme was remarkably holistic or integral in its approach in that its courses were inter-linked to address environmental issues, community-building skills,

and individual development through an understanding of our physical, mental, vital, and spiritual nature. Living Routes was the first, and perhaps the only, study-abroad programme in USA that sought to calculate and offset its carbon emissions. And the first programmes of Living Routes were offered in Auroville and Findhorn. The semester programme at Auroville was hugely popular, and Living Routes had run courses continuously in Auroville for two semesters each year without a break from 1998 to 2013. In recent years, Living Routes had also started to offer a short 3-week winter course at Sadhana Forest. In short, Living Routes was one of the first groups to embrace the potential of Auroville as an educational campus and to consistently act on it.

In summing up its lifetime accomplishments Living Routes (USA) notes in its last newsletter that it 1) provided 1,485 students with the skills, knowledge, experience and wisdom needed to become social, cultural and environmental change leaders on local, national and global levels; 2) supported the growth and development of sustainable communities worldwide that serve as models for a more just and sustainable way of living with and on the planet; and 3) led the way for other organizations and institutions to offer more dynamic and sustainable alternatives within the study abroad field. The team of Aurovilians who ran the Living Routes programme in Auroville thanked the community for being a fount of inspiration and a positive, transformative crucible for the students.

Bindu

## AUROVILLE STUDY PROGRAMMES

### A student testimony

Studying with *Living Routes* in Findhorn and Auroville had a profound impact on my successive studies and life path. Living in ecovillages empowered me with a progressive and idyllic vision of what is possible to achieve within the human challenge of sustainability. Returning to my college in the States I shared my experiences of ecovillage living and often found myself as the voice in the classroom saying, "Yes, I believe it is possible to transition to a sustainable future." Living Routes instilled this belief supported by the unique experiences I enjoyed while living and studying in an ecovillage. I hope that one day the programme may be revived and students can continue to take part and be inspired by the *Living Routes* experience.

Rachel Moore



# Where audience becomes performance

Just check *News & Notes* people tell me; it's all there. And indeed it is. A couple weeks ago, through a series of fortunate events, an auspicious acquaintance and a couple brilliant cheerleaders, I relocated to Auroville for a while. Somewhere on the wide scale between feeling nomadic and remarkably at home – but mostly eager to meet my neighbours – naturally, I turned to the local cultural events calendar to discover the idiosyncratic essence of the town. With its interior communities linked only by esoteric knowledge of the dirt roads and a few road signs, I learned quickly that this place doesn't invite spontaneous, ignorant exploration. *News & Notes* has assumed an important place in my morning ritual: a cup of tea and a quick skim for the night's events. After the *Lost and Found*, general announcements and taxi shares, is a trove of invitations – a film, a concert, a theatre performance – and for all of these there is always, always an eager audience. The evolving calendar has a diverse assortment, too. In just two weeks: two festivals, a baroque concert, a rock show, art exhibitions, a multitude of events for The Mother's birthday, a world dance event...

During my third week in Auroville I was tasked with writing on a cultural event Thinking that, surely, each performance or exhibition must be admired in conjunction with the others, I set out to discover thematic similarities among the sampling.

Often seduced by one element in particular – the audience – I found myself watching the viewers nearly as much as the performers. The receptivity and collaboration – the fluid and willing exchange that took place between those on stage and those in the audience – was almost as engaging as the show itself.

At the rock concert at the Kalabhumi Arena, three sounds competed for the night: a familiar refrain from the Grateful Dead; shouts and cheers from a receptive crowd; the intermittent roaring of motorcycles as last minute concertgoers arrive to catch up with the chorus. Father and son duo, Armando and Dhani, joined by Auroville friends, begin to play iconic classic rock songs from the Rolling Stones, Eric Clapton, The Police, The Beatles. A false start that could have been disheartening anywhere else – a power shortage shuts off the mike and lights – becomes a brief interlude for audience participation as a headlight is procured from the crowd for the lead singer, and flash-

lights become strobes that illuminate the band. The audience is clapping, and Armando, Dhani and company don't miss a beat as the music plugs back in, the Grateful Dead are alive again, and the lights turn on.

Behind me, the steps of the amphitheater are lined with enormous diversity – multigenerational, multi-lingual and international local families, visitors, volunteers and friends. The usual crowd in Auroville, I suspect, but remarkable nonetheless. There are no language barriers here – especially not when Clapton is involved. People have arrived without agenda or expectation; instead, an enthusiastic audience offers up their undivided attention. Representatives of all ages and backgrounds form a colorful and lively crowd that even jaded New York eyes can appreciate. The man sitting behind me on the steps – I saw him playing jazz the other night – hops on stage two songs later to play the guitar. The woman next to me just a moment ago – the one who was singing along – she's onstage now belting out Cream. The division between audience and performer grows ever more narrow – several "great Aurovilians" are invited up to play – as men and women take turns with the mike. In return, those that remain on the steps receive a show that



Armando and Dhani at Kalabhumi

bids the cathartic dance party, which has been itching in our spines, our feet, our hands all night. It's getting late and the crowd has thinned – parents have left to tuck young children into bed – and the

sandals come off and everyone is dancing, kicking up dust and shouting lyrics.

Two nights later at the Lively Up Your Earth Festival at Solitude Farm, a woman performs a sound check at the Secret Garden stage. A moment ago she was standing a few feet away from the stage, strumming her ukulele and joking with friends. Her puns begin to pick up speed, turning into song, and the decibel level of her voice climbs. I see her glance over at a friend and I talking – so far, her only audience – mischievously.

"I don't mean to be rude," she sings at us, "but this is an interlude." Thus begins her tangential monologue as she meanders onto the stage with her ukulele. "This instrument is just a prop!" she announces. She's hilarious. "Sound check, sound check. Hello! I'd like to introduce myself: my name is Anushka. Traveling from Bangalore, at the airport I said, 'nothing to declare! Just my crazy hair.'" A stream of conscious comedic rhyme follows, and I watch her audience expand behind us. A few friends hurry to the stage as back up singers and a synthesizer player. I've forgotten that this wasn't meant to be an act; just a sound check. People in the audience are laughing and Anushka is urged to carry on until the sound crew kicks her off stage – her jokes feeding off our energy. She stumbles; she tells us she's never performed before. She carries on.

What's remarkable in this moment? No one has expected this show, especially not Anushka. The atmosphere encourages and nurtures such experimentation. I can't imagine a stage allowing such

antics back home, not even in my small town – too much could go wrong. And comedy is decidedly the hardest act to pull off successfully, the fastest way to turn off a crowd. I ran into Anushka later in the day and asked what she thought of her own performance: "I couldn't have done this anywhere else in the world. My first time on stage!"

Last weekend's Hibiscus Festival: a man and woman are playing a Serbian folk song when I sit down. The sun is still high in the sky; the familiar sound of popcorn popping starts up. It's early, so we sit back in our chairs as people begin to trickle in. Not long now until we'll be on our feet. We're tucked in the trees with hibiscus and lights strung over our heads. I hear French, English, Tamil, Spanish, Russian... As the sun makes its descent, the performers swap out in merry progression. Each act is in a new language; new instruments are introduced. I watch as sticks and logs are thrown in a great heap to the side – preparation for a bonfire – also waiting for night to come. Children, little exhibitionists and always the first to dance, are on their feet stomping, clapping and twirling between the informal stage and the seated audience in a prelude to the night. We watch a hybrid-Odissi dance, and later hear French folk songs during which a man with a flute from stage jumps right in. Then there is chanting and the crowd grows tighter and closer. The smell of crepes cooking behind us, and the darkening sky above us, is intimate and familiar. "Om namah shivaya..." we chant. The beat picks up again, someone pulls out a guitar, chairs are pushed aside, and the dancing starts. There's no time to be self-

conscious or timid as the mass of bodies stomp and shimmy to the beat. Conversation has all but stopped now that the outliers have jumped in. Next, the jam session. Who's watching? There is no longer an audience and a performer – we are one.

The week of festivals culminates with a dance exhibition at the Unity Pavilion showcasing dancers from all around the globe performing Odissi, Bollywood, Tribal Fusion Belly Dance and Flamenco, to name a few. The audience – seated on pillows and chairs, leaning against walls – watches as nearly the entire world dances across the stage. After tea, for those of us still remaining, a dance class in Odissi and Bollywood begins. We learn the mudras of the Odissi dance and how to shake our hips Bollywood style. I step back from my dance

class to survey the scene: as the audience becomes more confident in their arm movements and facial expressions (a crucial element of Bollywood dance) it becomes clear that there is more than just an eagerness from the viewers to participate and share their support, but that a sense of trust has been established between the teacher (once the performer) and the dancer (once the audience). What was witnessed on stage is now deconstructed, and the viewer has finally stepped across the very distinct boundary from audience to performance altogether.

Perhaps the performers aren't always perfect – they hit a flat note, they forget the lyrics – but far more importantly, tolerance, warmth and honest interest and support from the audience never waivers. Collaboration is held to a high standard here since in Auroville it seems that the quality of the performance is gauged not on the flawlessness of the performer and an effusive write-up from a critic, but rather the response from the audience.

Back at the Armando and Dhani rock concert: "Play Led Zeppelin!" someone shouts. "Yeah! Play some Zeppelin!" repeats an echo. And we dance. The performers look tired, ready to end the night, but the audience is only getting started. We coax more songs out of them; the energy picks up speed, a friend is called back to the stage from the audience before, finally, the dénouement. The night closes with The Beatles. We yell goodbye, then scooters and motorcycles kick to a roar and the audience disperses into the pitch-black night. There is silence at Kalabhumi once more; but we'll be back.

Kirsten



Auroville 'Bollywood' dancers Einat and Tejas at the Hibiscus festival in Svdam

PHOTO: ANNE MARIE

PHOTO: COURTESY ARMANDO

## HEALTH

### Vision Centre opens at AVHC

The Aravind Primary Eye Care Centre was inaugurated and officially opened on February 21 at the Auroville Health Centre. The new vision centre provides comprehensive eye examinations, screenings for hypertension and diabetes, First Aid for foreign body removal, and tele-consultations with the ophthalmologist at the Aravind Eye Hospital in Pondicherry. Patients requiring treatment for cataract and speciality eye problems are referred to the main hospital. Affordable eye glasses are also available for purchase, and the centre will be providing eye screenings in schools with the help of teachers.

The Aravind Eye Care System (AECS) was founded in 1976

by Dr. G. Venkataswamy, a devotee of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother, as an alternative health care model to eliminate preventable blindness. Starting with just 11 beds in a rented house in Madurai, it has grown to ten major eye hospitals in Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry with over 4,000 beds, and a total of 45 Vision Centres in rural and semi-urban areas, including this newest one in Auroville. At the AECS, 65 percent of its eye surgeries were performed free of cost or at highly subsidized rates. It performs 45 percent of the cataract surgeries done in Pondicherry and Tamil Nadu.

This is the sixth outreach vision centre of the Aravind Eye Hospital, Pondicherry.



#### Subscription rates (including postage):

- ◆ One year subscription rates: India Rs. 450; other countries Rs 2,000 equivalent
  - ◆ Two year subscription rate: India Rs. 800; other countries Rs 3,700 equivalent.
- Those for whom the subscription rate is an obstacle are invited to contact *Auroville Today* for information on reduced rates. *Auroville Today* does not receive any funds from Auroville. Your subscription (or your supporting contribution of double the amount) helps us to continue this work.

#### There are three ways to subscribe:

1. **Through our website.** Subscriptions can be ordered and paid on-line through [www.auroville.com/auroville-today](http://www.auroville.com/auroville-today)
2. **By sending your contribution directly to Auroville Today.** Surrender, Auroville 605101, Tamil Nadu, India. Cheques sent directly to Auroville Today should be made payable to Auroville Unity Fund, specifying: "Contribution for Auroville Today". Personal cheques are preferred to bank cheques. Do not send postal money orders or cash.

#### 3. By sending your contribution to:

- ◆ **U.K.:** Auroville International U.K., c/o Martin Littlewood, 30 The Green, Surlingham, Norwich NR14 7AG, tel. 01508-538300, fax 01508-537122, email: [info@aviuk.org](mailto:info@aviuk.org)
- ◆ **The Netherlands and Belgium:** Auroville International Nederland, Athlonestraat 77, 6524 BJ Nijmegen, Triodos Bank nr 1984.20.927, IBAN NL26 TRIO 0198 4209 27, BIC: TRIONL2U, email: [penningmeester@avinl.org](mailto:penningmeester@avinl.org)

#### ◆ **USA:** Make checks payable to Auroville International USA, and send to:

AVI USA, P.O. Box 188158, Sacramento, CA 95818, Tel: (831) 425-5620; email: [info@aviusa.org](mailto:info@aviusa.org); or to Pondicherry, 12 Tinker St, Woodstock NY 12498, tel: 845-679-2926, email: [info@pondi.biz](mailto:info@pondi.biz)

◆ **Germany:** Auroville International Deutschland e.V., Solmsstrasse 6, 10961 Berlin, tel. (49)(0)30-42803150, Fax (49)(0)30-92091376, email:

[info@auroville.de](mailto:info@auroville.de), GLS Gemeinschaftsbank, BIC: GENODEM1GLS, IBAN: DE16430609678019389200,

**Editorial team:** Alan, Carel, Larry, Mandakini. Guest editor: Kirsten. Proofreading: Alan, DTP: Carel. Photo editing: Jean-Denis. Published by Carel Thieme on behalf of the Auroville Foundation. Printed by Brihat Consultants, Pondicherry, and published at Surrender, Auroville 605101, Tamil Nadu.

*Auroville Today* does not necessarily reflect the views of the community as a whole.