

Auroville Today

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Auroville's monthly news magazine since 1988

Main Theme: Planning the city

Town planning is in the news once again. Some months ago construction began on a perfectly curved section of the Crown road, resurrecting concerns among some Aurovilians that geometry was more important to the town planners than sensitive development, and that major developments would be pushed through without proper community consultation.

Then, in May, young design professionals from all over India attended the workshop 'Bikescares' which, among other things, was designed to facilitate different patterns of mobility in and around the city.

The next month Aurovilians were invited to attend a one day workshop by a group of Auroville architects as part of a participatory planning exercise. The organizers expected no more than about thirty people to attend. In the event, over a hundred Aurovilians showed up and spent the day engaged in enthusiastic discussion about planning issues, demonstrating the high level of interest in the topic.

Interestingly, the Governing Board and the International Advisory Council have also expressed concern about the state of Auroville's planning and development, and the fact that the renowned architect and planner Dr. B.V. Doshi is now a member of the Governing Board may give a new impetus and direction to our town planning work.

In truth, planning has been a hot topic in Auroville for many years. Although a Master Plan was finally approved by the Residents Assembly in 1999, Aurovilians continue to differ over whether development should be closely guided by the original 'Galaxy' model or should happen more 'organically'. There are also different views concerning how far non-specialists should be able to participate in the planning and decision-making process.

For this issue we talked to architects and planners who have devoted a great deal of time and thought to the issue of planning in Auroville. While there are clear disagreements concerning the pace and type of development that need to be adopted, everybody is agreed that the time has come to create a denser, more urban environment. But how? And what will it look like?



The newly laid section of the Crown Road from the Solar Kitchen to Surrender community

B.V. Doshi: "What happened to Auroville's spirit?"

Balkrishna V. Doshi is one of India's most eminent architects. He is a Fellow of the Royal Institute of British Architects and a Fellow of the Indian Institute of Architects. In his early career he worked in Paris for four years with Le Corbusier then returned to Ahmedabad to supervise Le Corbusier's work there. He has also worked closely with Louis Kahn and Anant Raje.

Dr. Doshi has designed many institutional campuses, including the Indian Institute of Management, Bangalore, and his urban planning work includes the proposal for the new city of Jaipur. He also designed *Aranya*, a slum redevelopment township in Indore, which won an international prize.

Apart from his international fame as an architect, Dr. Doshi is well known as an educator and institution builder. In 1955 he established his environmental design studio, *Vastu-Shilpa*, and in 1962 started the School of Architecture, Ahmedabad. In 1972 he founded the Centre for Environmental Planning and Technology (CEPT) one of India's top architectural schools, now called CEPT University.

In 2008, a film documentary on his work and philosophy was released. Recently the film was shown in Auroville when Dr. Doshi visited the community in his capacity as a new member of the Governing Board of the Auroville Foundation. Auroville Today interviewed him at the end of his visit.

Auroville Today: What was your reaction when you were asked to serve on the Governing Board?

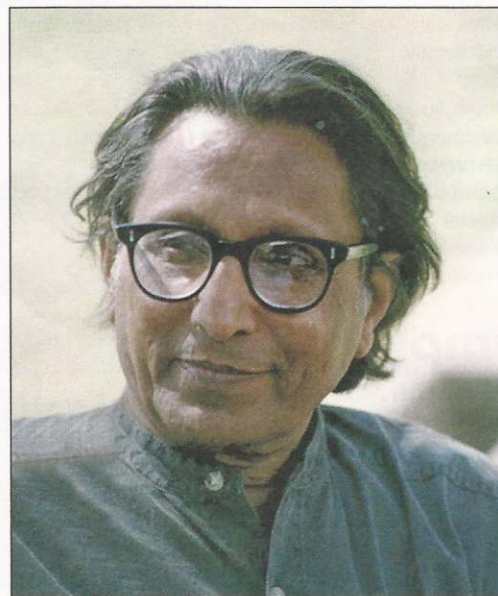
I said 'yes' immediately. What else could I say? It's The Mother's place.

What role do you want to play?

I don't know yet how I can contribute to Auroville. Firstly, I want to look around, to see where the energy of Auroville lies and how that can be used positively. Then, if I am asked to express an opinion, I will do so. I have never stopped expressing my opinions wherever I go because as a professional, individual and academician I have an obligation to say what I believe in. If what I say is not acceptable, fine. If it's acceptable and I'm asked to participate, I will do my best.

What is your response to the Galaxy concept and to the Master Plan?

When I first saw the Galaxy plan many years ago I thought, 'My god, what is this?' It was so dynamic; it had power. It felt as if it was constantly expanding and connecting with a tremendous magnetic force the visible and the invisible cosmic forces. The question is, how can those forces manifest today? That was forty years ago and many changes have happened since. So the Galaxy is a good plan but it has to be studied not only in the context of the land, the natural waterways and the climate but also in the context of changes that have happened to our aspirations, values and our relationships to the world as a



Balkrishna V. Doshi

whole. No doubt, Mother's vision will guide us, but what about our mindset? Today many people have computers and can work at home so you don't need so many office buildings. Also it's important to conserve energy to the maximum so transportation and the need for physical distances need to be reviewed. Then, when you look at how the villages around have expanded, you need to ask yourself, 'Will Auroville be isolated or will it act as a magnet through providing something which is missing within

and around?'

Auroville must make people want to go there because it offers what people cannot find anywhere else. Silence. Peace. Light. Auroville should radiate ideas of a new world by representing the future in every aspect of life. It should be an ideal community of the future.

You've been visiting various projects in the community over the past few days. Do you feel that Auroville is succeeding in doing this?

To answer this I need to give a little history. When I came here first in the early 1970s, I was completely bowled over by the kind of architectural experimentation that was happening. Here were houses with thatched roofs, houses built half into the ground and with arches made out of bricks and ferrocement. At that time Indian architects were asking themselves how to make do with the minimum of resources yet develop something else, like the long-term overall sustainability one sees in nature, bio-diverse yet harmonious. When I looked at Auroville then, I thought it was probably the most important architectural pioneering work happening in India because the Aurovilians were using natural ventilation and passive cooling while taking advantage of all the latest building technologies, closely knit into the natural fabric and societal ideas.

The other thing that interested me was the kind of life people were leading. I was fascinated that people would leave everything and come here to become devotees. I saw a life of simplicity and frugality and felt the aspiration towards something else – the unknown, the immeasurable. This was my early image of Auroville.

Some years later I came again and met Roger. I saw some of his buildings. Those buildings told me about the adventure of the spirit. Later I went to Roger's office and it was full of models and drawings, just like Le Corbusier's Chandigarh office. It really felt like a new world was emerging.

The last time I met Roger we visited the recently completed Matrimandir. That's when I understood for the first time what silence and light really is, and I realized that it is possible to realize some dreams.

However, on that visit I noticed that some of the old buildings I had liked had disappeared and that the recent constructions were static; the dynamism was missing.

continued on page 2

• Matrimandir:

- ♦ entrance shields completed
- ♦ progress in the *Garden of Existence*

• GB and IAC meet in Auroville

pages 2-3

• Revisiting our planning process:

- ♦ AV architects David, Lata, Suhasini, Prashant and Helmut
- ♦ *L'Avenir d'Auroville* coordinators Sauro, Lalit and Pino

pages 4-6

• Kanniappan and the puncture and repair service

- ♦ Alain Grandcolas: researching the psychic being
- ♦ 20 years of AV Earth Institute

pages 6-7

• Passings

- ♦ Youth biodiversity symposium
- ♦ Première of film *City of Dawn* at Chicago conference
- ♦ Francis Rothluebber's story

pages 7-8

continued from page 1

In fact, when I first saw images of the new apartment buildings in a recent issue of *Auroville Today* [May, 2009] I thought it must be a review of buildings in 1950s Germany. But when I realized it was happening in Auroville right now I began to worry, because the world has moved on. Now we talk about global warming, sustainability, saving of energy, carbon-emissions. Yet here are buildings being designed and constructed in exactly the same way as they would be in Mumbai or Pune. Now it's all about cost and functionality. What happened to Auroville's spirit? If you build a new city like this, will it really be a model for the world? The soul is perhaps getting lost.

Perhaps one reason why recent Aurovilian architecture tends to be more 'functional' is that some of the earlier 'futuristic' architecture proved to be dysfunctional.

Maybe temperature-wise they didn't work, maybe they are high-maintenance, but there is a flow in those buildings connecting the sky and the earth;

everything is in movement. That's the spirit of the Galaxy, that's life, that's what should be apparent everywhere in Auroville, threaded throughout the tapestry. In this sense, those early buildings serve a function. Not just a day-to-day one, but a psychological function, an emotional one.

You sound pessimistic about the future of architecture and town planning in Auroville.

If Auroville continues on the way it is going now, it will become like anywhere else in the world and its cohesion will be lost. But this doesn't have to happen. It is not too late because you are only 2,000 people today and there is a long way to go. I'm sure in the Master Plan of Auroville there is a lot of scope for new ideas because nothing much has yet been built. We should remain open to change. If there is a definite purpose, a sufficient reason, to do something, we should try our best to manifest it. But if something is not workable we should try something else and not keep saying 'This is how it should be'. There is no such thing as

absolutely set patterns. As the force evolves, it creates new forms.

This is a critical time and the talented younger architects and planners you have need open-minded guidance from their seniors; they must be encouraged to take risks. Some of my students were here for two months and they did a lot of alternative scenarios. They did not change the lines of force or the zones of the Master Plan yet they came up with alternative scenarios which were quite fascinating and worth looking at.

Is there anything in the present Master Plan you would change?

It's difficult for me to comment specifically upon it. I don't think the zoning is a big issue as it is intended to be mixed zoning: it's not a distinct separation between the zones. On the other hand, I would prefer the Crown road to be entirely pedestrianised, silent, and no cars should be allowed inside the city: with a city radius of only 2.5 kilometres you don't need the kind of transport you have in regular cities. The main thing is to get the silence and the light in the city. It should be a place

where you can walk anywhere in a short time, where you can be with your family, do your work and stay connected with the world as well as that which is deep within you.

Today in India the community places in and around buildings are being lost. If Auroville continues on its present course it will go the same way and your cohesive identity will be lost. You already live dispersed, separated from one another. So there is a need to draw up a compact living plan for 5000 people with spaces for social interaction. It can be based upon what Roger originally visualized but evolved further: creation is a patient spiritual search and is always about modifying or evolving existing definitions.

Planning is about establishing the ground structure. In every city in the world that people enjoy, the ground structure is very important. It's about how people move around, live, celebrate. We're talking about intimacy, scale, porosity, joy; these are the things by which these cities are known. The buildings accept change, adaptation, and people enjoy living there because they feel free.

The greater the integration the more likely something is to endure. The villages around Auroville are its bones and marrow, its muscles. What does the Master Plan say about them? Isn't it our job to include them, to elevate their lives also? If you can convince people how worthy Auroville is, how it can change their lives, they will want to help you and everything will be possible.

That's the strength of this place: all the different components of an integral solution are here. It's a matter of fitting the pieces together.

Architecture can help, but it's less important than the spiritual aspect. The most important thing for you to do is to develop your values, to evolve an Aurovilian way of life. Only then will an Aurovilian way of expressing it evolve.

The most important ingredients are belief, faith and perseverance and all of these exist in abundance in Auroville. So if at the moment I'm saddened, in the long-term I'm very optimistic that if Auroville looks at itself afresh, profoundly, it can truly become a project of global heritage.

From an interview by Alan

MATRIMANDIR

Progress in the Garden of Existence

A 12-ton stone, the centre piece of the Garden of Existence, has been installed.

In April this year, *Auroville Today* carried a front-page article on designing the Matrimandir Gardens. On the 16th of that month the designers moved from their office to the site and started work on the first of the twelve Gardens, the Garden of Existence. They marked the oval shape of the Garden and its spiral pathway. Soon afterwards an earth-mover levelled the area for the large central stone and its surrounding field of white gravel.

Sri Aurobindo speaks about existence (*sat*), not only as "pure existence, eternal, infinite, not affected by the succession of time...", but also as "the stuff of its own becoming... that has formed itself fundamentally as matter". It is "the supreme Existence which has become the Universe". Following Sri Aurobindo, the Garden of Existence has to express both "a fact of being" as well as "a fact of becoming." Existence, as the first of the twelve Gardens, is therefore considered as the beginning of manifestation and evolution. Similarly twelve is,

according to The Mother, "a symbol of manifestation, double perfection – in essence and manifestation – in the creation."

The Garden of Existence is marked by three main elements: a large primary stone, a spring of water and the presence of a pink hibiscus called by The Mother



The hibiscus 'psychic power in existence'

'psychic power in existence'. Psychic power has been described by The Mother as 'manifold, imperious and irresistible in its comprehensive sweetness'. The term 'psychic power' also recalls the "psychic being" which is "the soul developing in manifestation".

The primary stone symbolizes fundamental matter emerging from the soil which is present in two qualities: in the subsoil as being, in the surface soil as becoming. Hidden underneath the stone, a spring, source of

manifestation, will fill a small pool whose water will flow back into *sat* (Existence). From the source, a thin golden spiral will spread out in the twelve gardens, symbolising both the dynamism of the manifestation and the fundamental unity of the twelve gardens. The garden will also make generous use of minerals.

The search for the central stone was long and eventful. By the end of April, an ideal candidate was discovered in a quarry near Mailam. But its estimated weight of 18 tons made immediate transportation impossible. When a suitable crane and lorry had finally been found, the team learned that the stone had been blown to pieces by a nearby quarry blast.

In June a second stone was identified in a quarry near Thiruvakarai. The new stone, weighing about 12 tons, was slightly smaller than the first one but of a pleasing shape. To guard against any mishaps three members of the Matrimandir team kept watch over the stone until, on June 6th, it was transported to Auroville where it arrived in the early evening.



Setting down the 12-ton stone in the Matrimandir Gardens

The unloading and positioning of the stone started that same night. By the light of a three-quarter moon and lamps mounted on surrounding trees, two cranes lifted the stone from the lorry and lowered it to the ground. A long series of pushes and pulls manoeuvred it into its final position: pointing towards the Banyan tree in the distance, with its front end some 90 centimetres off the ground.

Source: Matrimandir Newsletter August 2009



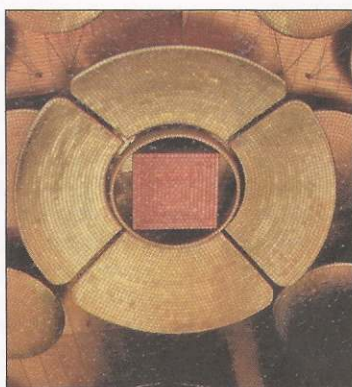
The final resting place of the rock in the Garden of Existence

The four entrances completed

The shields of the South and East entrances of the Matrimandir have finally been fitted with their unique centre pieces.

The Mother gave the four pillars with the entrances to the Matrimandir the names of the four aspects of the Mahashakti. The north pillar is Mahakali, the aspect of strength; the West pillar is Mahasaraswati, the aspect of perfection in works; the South pillar is Maheshwari, the aspect of wisdom; and the East pillar is Mahalakshmi, the aspect of beauty and harmony.

Each entrance is decorated with a large four-petalled golden disc with, at its centre, a particular geometric shape linked to the pillar's distinctive significance, made from tinted gold-in-glass tiles in different colours. Mahakali's is marked by a red square; Mahasaraswati by a light-blue triangle; Maheshwari by an orange hexagon; and Mahalakshmi by a pink circle.



The Mahakali four-petalled disc with the red square at its centre

(Mahalakshmi). After the controlled annealing of the coloured glass, tile production followed. Glass was cut into the required shapes, one gold and two silver foils were placed between a plain glass sheet and the coloured glass sheet, and the sandwiches were subsequently fired in vacuum ovens.

Source: Matrimandir Newsletter August 2009 and Gold in Glass Pvt. Ltd.

On June 29th, the specially shaped centre pieces for the Maheshwari and Mahalakshmi entrances were lifted by crane and fitted in place.

The specially-coloured tiles had been manufactured by manually applying coloured glass powder onto a carrier sheet of glass. These sheets of glass were then fired in electric ovens where the coloured glass powder melts and fuses with the carrier glass. The colours used were red (Mahakali), turquoise (Mahasaraswati), orange (Maheshwari) and pink



The orange hexagon of the Maheshwari entrance is lifted into place.

36th meeting of the Governing Board in Auroville

The Governing Board of the Auroville Foundation had its 36th meeting on July 26th in Auroville.

It was attended by all board members – Dr. Karan Singh, Mr. B.V. Doshi, Dr. Mallika Sarabhai, Dr. Aster Patel, Ms. Ameeta Mehra, Mr. A. Bagchi, and ex-officio member Mr. Amit Khare – with the exception of ex-officio member Mr. S.K. Ray, the Financial Advisor of the Ministry of Home Affairs, who was unable to attend.

The minutes of the meeting of the Board were made available to Auroville by the Working Committee on August 25th. Here follow some excerpts.

The Chairman, Dr. Karan Singh opened the meeting stating that he was happy that the Government of India had accepted his suggestion to appoint the Board for another term with the inclusion of Shri. B.V. Doshi who replaces the late Roger Anger. Dr. Karan Singh, in introducing Shri. Doshi, said he is an eminent architect who, over a long professional career, has created a corpus of architecture around the country that is informed by refinement of modern architecture in the Indian context.

The Chairman further emphasized that the focus of all efforts should now be the consolidation of the land within the City area and on its planning and development. Top priority should be given to securing the lands that are in private hands through the exchange with Auroville lands located outside the Master Plan area. He requested the total cooperation of all the residents including those who may have to move from their outlying locations. Stressing the urgency of the task, the Chairman warned that further delay is fraught with grave risks.

The Board then passed various issues. It decided to recall its earlier (and

much objected to) decision of introducing a compulsory co-signatory system for the Unity Fund [see *AurovilleToday* # 222, August 2007], after the HRD Ministry ex-officio Board Member Shri. Amit Khare explained that the Auroville Foundation, being created by an Act of Parliament for the specific purpose of furthering the development of Auroville, is an autonomous institution. This view coincided with the views expressed by eminent Supreme Court lawyers Shri. Soli Sorabjee and Shri. Fali S. Nariman.

The decision to drop the co-signatory system was also facilitated as in the past years the Working Committee, the Funds and Assets Management Committee (FAMC) and the Auroville Unity Fund had streamlined the financial management and accounting systems with help from the Foundation's internal auditors. The Board decided that for Government of India grants, the Secretary and the Finance and Administrative Officer will be the signing authority; all other funds can be signed by any two out of the four executives of the Auroville Unity Fund.

Another main topic was the building of the city and the functioning of *L'Avenir d'Auroville*. Expressing his unhappiness at the tardiness of the city's planning and development, the Chairman highlighted the need for a more inclusive approach and better co-ordination and cooperation between the Working Committee, the FAMC, the Land Coordination Committee and *L'Avenir* in this regard.

Shri. B V Doshi said that, during his short stay in Auroville, he had visited various areas within Auroville and also interacted with a number of residents. He felt that the city's planning and development may benefit from a critical reappraisal. Citing an example, he said that the 'crown road' that is being devel-

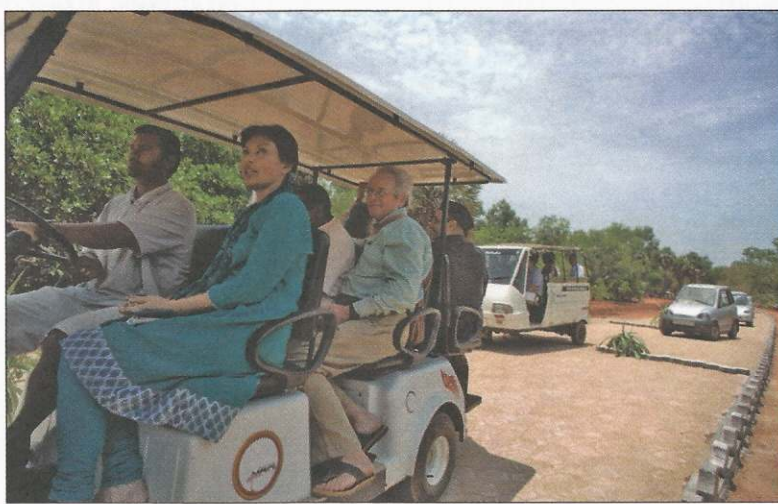


PHOTO GIORGIO

Governing board member Dr. Mallika Sarabhai and Gilles Guigan of the Working Committee, along with other members of the Governing Board at the inauguration of the Crown road

oped appears to be planned for heavy vehicular traffic while a shaded avenue for circumambulation around Matrimandir for pedestrians may have been more in consonance with Auroville ambience.

Dr. Mallika Sarabhai was critical of cement-concrete structures of a residential complex under construction. She said that all new structures within Auroville must be built, to the extent possible, with environment-friendly material and be environmentally sustainable. They must act as bench-marks for 'green buildings' in the country. In this connection, the Chairman mentioned the exemplary work done by the Auroville Earth Institute.

The meeting then requested Shri. B V Doshi, Dr. Mallika Sarabhai and Ms. Ameeta Mehra to meet with the members of *L'Avenir* to discuss the issues. The Board observed that, in view of the importance of its task, *L'Avenir* could be rationalised and strengthened by inducting experts from various disciplines. The

meeting also welcomed a proposal from Dr. Aster Patel to bring together men and women of vision and expertise from all over India and the world in a common platform for brainstorming and interaction.

The meeting concluded by fixing the date for its next meeting in Auroville. The Chairman observed that on April 4, 2010, it will be 100 years ago that Sri Aurobindo arrived in Pondicherry. The centenary of Sri Aurobindo's arrival will be celebrated and a committee under the chairmanship of the Lieutenant-Governor of Puducherry has been constituted, of which the Auroville Foundation is also a member. The Chairman proposed that the Board and the International Advisory Council meet in Auroville on April 2 and 3, 2010 so that the members can participate in the event. The Board welcomed the proposal. The Chairman advised the Working Committee to organise suitable events on this occasion.

Report of the International Advisory Council

On July 24-26, the 17th meeting of the International Advisory Council took place in Auroville. All members – Dr. Vishakha Desai, Sir Mark Tully, Dr. Doudou Diene, Mr. Julian Lines and Dr. Marc Luyckx Ghisi – were present. In accordance with tradition, its minutes were made available to Auroville the day after the meeting. Here follow some excerpts:

Sir Mark Tully was re-elected as Chairman of the Council and Mr. Marc Luyckx Ghisi as Vice-Chairman.

The Council stated that its general impression of Auroville is very positive and that there is both a practical and intuitive sense of a forward movement. The Council was pleased to observe a real progress in responsible management of Auroville by Aurovilians themselves. It encouraged all the groups to come up with a mechanism that allows for a stronger functioning of Auroville as a whole since it is clear that there is still a lack of communication among different groups and the inability to hear sincere criticism. "We want to see a cohesive strategy to project Auroville as a 21st century incubator for holistic, sustainable, innovative solutions for the problems of this century. We therefore strongly recommend the various executive bodies take up the matter of creating a cohesive message of what Auroville stands for through specific examples and how the experiments can serve as models not only regionally, but also nationally and internationally."

Members of the Council were observers at the July 22 meeting *L'Avenir d'Auroville* had organized with world-class experts on town planning. It complimented *L'Avenir* on doing an excellent job in creating around them an outstanding advisory committee. "We were very interested to hear their advice on the necessity of having a plan for the whole bioregion, to instil a real win-win co-evolving relation with all the surrounding villages. They also insisted that the building of a city was not only a physical creation but, most of all, a social, cultur-



IAC members from left Julian Lines, Dr. Marc Luyckx Ghisi, Dr. Vishakha Desai and Sir Mark Tully listen to Auroville presentations in the Town Hall (not present in photo: Dr. Doudou Diene).

al and spiritual creation, showing that they had a deeper understanding of Auroville's ideals." The Council stated that "Those experts have to be listened to by *L'Avenir d'Auroville* team, and by the whole community, because of their unique constellation of talent and goodwill and their dedication to working with all stakeholders. We thus advise *L'Avenir*, the Working Committee and other working groups to come together to create a common and united vision. This would then help bring the community to embrace construction of the city along Mother's vision adapted to today's necessities." The Council welcomed Governing Board member Mr. B. V. Doshi, and felt it appropriate for Mr. Doshi to play a dynamic role to facilitate the relationship between the Governing Board, *L'Avenir* and the community at large.

Regarding finances, the Council congratulated the FAMC and the Budget Coordination Committee for setting out all working procedures that were requested by the Governing Board. "The procedures are more transparent and things are going in a good direction. Aurovilians are becoming more and more responsible executives of their finances." The Council urged trans-

parency for all funds including Government funds and advised to cancel the co-signatory process.

Regarding aias, the Council stressed the need that natural justice must apply to the Aurovilians who have been expelled from India and renewed its appeal for them to return. On the issue of consolidating the lands for the city area, the Council reiterated its stand that Auroville should formally commit itself to the concept of land exchange but should bear in mind the sensitivities of those who have set up projects outside the greenbelt. "To this end we propose the development of a policy document outlining the criteria for exchange of land, which takes into account these sensitivities."

Regarding Fundraising and Outreach, the Council observed that, "as Auroville reaches new levels of sophistication and complexity, professional skills are needed to accomplish its goals. Training Aurovilians (of all ages) and bringing in consultants is a critical part of meeting the needs of the community. Raising funds and relating to the outside world require a specific skill sets and preparation. The IAC will assist in making connections between Auroville's needs and talents both in India and abroad with experts who understand and share our ideals."

The IAC, in concluding its minutes, expressed the hope of becoming more proactive than reactive. It stressed the need for the creation of clear policies and procedures, not in order to smother the Auroville spirit and freedom but rather to promote transparency, trust and collaboration.

In brief

Crown Road open

The first stretch of the Crown Road was opened on July 25th by Dr. Karan Singh. The Road Service has urged Aurovilians to consider the stretch not as a fast connection between two places, but as a road to inner quietude and so to drive at a speed of 25 km/h. Experiments with speed breakers are ongoing to help all follow the directive. The Road Service has committed itself to continue the research on the road to manifest beauty, comfort and security.

Skynet closes down

Skynet, Auroville's own Network provider, ended its operations on August 25, 2009 after six years of service. With the advent of broadband connectivity offered by commercial outsiders, it could no longer compete.

SAAMIA

On August 15, the website: www.saamia.com started. The acronym SAAMIA stands for 'Sri Aurobindo And Mother' In Arabic. In Arabic *Saamia* means "sublime." The website is trilingual (Arabic, English, and French). It aspires to offer translations of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother's writings into Arabic. For more info contact organiser Zackaria Moursi at zackaria_moursi@gmx.ch

Tamil Heritage Centre starts

The foundation stone of the Tamil Heritage Centre was laid on August 23rd, *Ganesh Chaturthi* day, at a site in the compound of Bharat Nivas, the Pavilion of India in the International Zone.

Handicapped access to Pitanga

The cultural centre Pitanga at Samasti, which is used by about 600 people a week, is now providing wheelchair-friendly access. A bathroom for handicapped persons and a special parking area will follow.

Land Consolidation

The Working Committee and the Funds and Assets Management Committee have called for feedback on the planned exchange of lands outside the Master Plan area to consolidate those within it. Members of all concerned groups participated in two meetings to discuss the possibilities of finding a harmonious and realistic agreement for all individuals and groups concerned. A total of 50 acres of land was identified for possible exchange.

Optimizing the use of outside lands

The FAMC has formed a Land Resources Development Task Force to look into the optimal use of Auroville lands outside the Master Plan area which have potential to generate short, medium and long-term benefits for the township.

Recordings by old time residents

Auroville Archives has started voice and video recordings of old-time Aurovilians. The recordings document when they came to Auroville and what they have been doing, so that future generations may have some idea what it meant to participate in the early days of what The Mother described as a 'Living Laboratory'.

"You can't leave planning just to the planners"

David, Lata, Prashant and Suhasini are Aurovilian architects with expertise or an interest in planning who have devoted considerable thought to how best we can develop the urban fabric of Auroville. Here they share some of their insights as well as their frustrations with the present planning process.

The Galaxy model of the township has not always enjoyed a good press. Some have seen it as a symbol of outdated planning which puts buildings before the environment and favours rigid centralised control over organic growth. Yet many people have been inspired, and continue to be inspired by it. "The Galaxy is a beautiful concept," says Lata. "In the original model there is this very beautiful transition from the inside to the outside," adds Prashant. "But more than that, it is the force it represents. It's so dynamic, spiralling and radiating outward."

Neither Lata nor Prashant would favour trying to literally translate the Galaxy concept on to the ground. They are keenly aware that it takes no account of ground realities like topography and water flows and would need to be modified accordingly. Yet both feel that the present planning process betrays the original inspiration. "When I arrived in 2003 and read the Master Plan, my first reaction was, 'What have they done to the Galaxy?'" says Lata. "If you look at what has been built and is being built at present, there is not a single thing which helps manifest the Galaxy. On the contrary, the planners seem to be trying to destroy it."

A true Galaxy has no edges

Prashant points out how the proposed Crown Road, which has now begun to be built, will break the flow of the Galaxy and that the proposed radial roads will accentuate this process by dividing the township up into smaller pieces. "You will just get sections: it will look pathetic." In fact, eminent planners like Dr. Doshi and Professor K.T.Ravindran (who is an adviser to *L'Avenir d'Auroville*, the present planning group) have said that the Galaxy should not be rigidly confined to a radius of 2.5 kilometres. It should be circling out into the larger region, for a true Galaxy has no edges.

"If I look at the plan Aurovilian architect Anupama made for the inner city in collaboration with Roger," says David, "I don't see the Galaxy in there. If you look at how Roger worked as an architect, his buildings are like individual jewels – they are objects in space, sculptures. If you see the present Town Hall, Media Centre and Anupama's inner city development plan, it is clear that the whole of the city is to be developed as individual buildings, with some connected by covered passages as a token gesture. In the end this is a true mirror of where we stand as a society today – each project being insular, totally isolated in its landscape and with no unity in our diversity. But we have to ask ourselves if this is what we want."

Suhasini takes a different tack. "What interests me most is building an urban society, a society which is non-competitive and goes beyond different ethnic, social and cultural backgrounds to create an urban form of living that would answer to the crisis which humanity faces today in relation to the environment and scarce resources. I believe this was one of Mother's intentions when she created this project and the particular form the city takes is less important than her intention. Actually, I think the Galaxy has been an obstacle to realizing this. Trying to decide on what is essential about the Galaxy has divided us and wasted a lot of our energy. We are so fixed on the form that we have neglected the true function of this city."

David recalls a conversation with one of Roger's inner circle who had told him that the task of the Aurovilians was simply to build the city. "I told him I was not hired as an architect from outside to come and build a city; I've come here to be an Aurovilian and to do the yoga whilst building it. It's actually quite insulting to say, 'You're here just



Clockwise from top left: Lata, David, Suhasini, Prashant

to build the city', and yet it highlights two diametrically opposed viewpoints. Do we work towards human unity through building the city or is the inner work supposed to start after we've finished it? To put it another way, how much disunity are we prepared to create in striving for unity?"

A religious dimension?

Suhasini confirms there is a problem here. "If someone says to the planners 'I don't understand your intention in making a road like that' – which is happening right now regarding the Crown road – it is taken to mean that you are against The Mother! The city has become a personification, the test of your loyalty to the spiritual message of The Mother and Sri Aurobindo. Why do they think they have the sole authority to interpret that message?"

"I've also been told that I'm here to build the city so I should be giving our planners all my support," says Lata. "But I'm not here to build a city; I'm here to build Auroville, which is a very different thing. People think a city is buildings, infrastructure, roads, but that is not a city. A city is people, communication, interactions, aspirations; it is something which evolves over time."

"And, even if you build the city, who is going to be attracted to live there?" asks Prashant. "As Dr. Doshi pointed out, if you start by building houses you will always be able to fill them, but not necessarily with the people you want. That's why he favours beginning with activities which will attract the right people, like developing centres of excellence based upon our present areas of expertise."

Dr. Doshi does not underestimate the difficulty. Even though he has considerable experience of town planning he says that manifesting the Galaxy without betraying its spirit would be the greatest challenge of all. "There's nothing in the world we can copy," explains David, "no precedents. As an architect, to be part of that exploration is what inspires me. But exploration requires letting go of many things. I think the problem is that many of Roger's inner circle are not trained designers or architects so they have had a tendency to latch on to things like radial roads and ring roads because it's something they are able to relate to. Each and every Aurovilian has something to offer the planning process, but those insights

which are supposed to manifest need to be teased-out and moulded into an inspiring workable whole."

Fear of community participation

"Their fear is that wider participation will create chaos," says Suhasini. "Or else, seeing the negative reactions to developments like the Town Hall or the Crown road, they assume that many

areas which are part of the larger Crown project. This was approved but the planning group did something completely different. They only built part of the road."

"When we asked Dr. Doshi what we should concentrate on next, he said we should observe where people naturally meet and then do some small interventions in these places, like planting a few trees, providing sitting places, and then slowly scale them up."

"The idea is to provide spaces that will foster the creation of a vibrant community," clarifies Lata.

"We should focus on two or three nodes like the Solar Kitchen plaza and get some density," agrees David, "but I would also argue that collectively we need to reconnect to the vision. Only if we can inspire people from within will we get a new momentum. Building roads won't inspire anybody – it's too mundane. In this regard, Crownways [an experiment in developing part of the Crown as an urban pedestrianised area] although it was not a fully-refined proposal, got an overwhelmingly positive response from many Aurovilians. I had people coming up to me who said they had always been against the Galaxy but if that's how the Galaxy could be interpreted, they were all for it."

A more creative approach to the Galaxy

"So let's try to use the Galaxy more creatively and start to create some parameters."

What would the interviewees do if the old planning group was dissolved and they were invited to take up that work? "I wouldn't be part of it," says Suhasini. "There has to be a change in the system, not the people. The present system attracts a certain kind of person, or people change when they get into

mixed land use for a diversity of cultures. Then the Master Plan can evolve out of that."

"We have to get the community involved, there's no alternative," agrees Prashant, "and for that to happen we have to demystify planning. The present planning group keeps saying that planning is very complex, specialized, so people back off. But you can't leave planning just to the planners; everybody is an equal stakeholder in this and everybody can contribute something useful."

Aurovilians like to participate

"Many people would like to participate in the planning process," says Lata, "just look at how many people turned up for the participatory planning day at Last School recently. The recent 'Bikescape' workshop also generated a lot of positive energy and momentum, so if more and more such events happen and people see something manifesting, then I think eventually *L'Avenir* will have to come around."

But how will people's ideas about development get elicited and expressed? At the recent participatory planning day held in Last School there was a lot of support for creating an interface between the planners and the people. David himself has been helping to coordinate such a group, *Dreamcatchers*, for the last four years. "Crownways emerged from this collective process, but although Roger clearly appreciated some aspects of it the whole approach seemed to be rejected because it did not respect the perfect circularity of the Crown."

"It then became very difficult to have an informed discussion about the impact of these kinds of decisions on the Galaxy plan. We have to be very careful we don't get into a situation where the powers-that-be end up just paying lip service to people's participation. I heard a nice term the other day – the 'Astroturf' movement. This refers to a political strategy in the U.S. where conservative elements set up fake 'grassroots' organizations to either give the impression of listening or to spread disinformation, with the ultimate aim of going ahead with their own ideas regardless. We have to ensure there is no place for this in Auroville."

Opening a Pandora's box?

"The planners think if they listen to the people then they will open up a Pandora's Box. They are afraid that wider participation will bring in new ideas and this will threaten the purity of the project," says Suhasini. "That's why they keep telling us that everything is done, the only reason we people are here is to work on manifesting it. They fear that the ego of Auroville architects, in particular, will get in the way of the work which Mother wants them to do."

So how does one get beyond this?

"We have to evolve a process that gives form to the grassroots voice, but you don't have to go to the planners with that voice. Once people start thinking about what they want to do in a proactive rather than a reactive manner, this will have its own momentum. After all, *L'Avenir* is really just a group of people who are holding office for a limited period of time. The real development is taking place where projects are being drawn up and funding found. True, they still have to pass through the narrow gates of *L'Avenir* to be officially recognised as a community project, but once the community momentum builds sufficiently, other channels will be found. So let the present planning group remain where they are. One day the flow will simply bypass them, meandering round their gates."

"If people want to grow here, to live a richer life, they have to find a voice and get more concerned about development. Then the game will evolve as we play it."

Based on interviews by Alan



PHOTO COURTESY DREAMCATCHERS

'Crownways' is an extended plaza. Paths interact and intersect at different points around the circumference of the Crown, thus creating urban experiences and a cityscape more suited to the speed of travel which Mother foresaw. Pedestrians would have the highest priority, followed by bicycles, electric bikes and non-polluting public transport. Access for delivery and waste disposal vehicles would be restricted. The existing radials are kept, but they are for the use of pedestrians, cycles, electric bikes and public transport only. Along with the development of the lines-of-sight to the Matrimandir they provide the perfect opportunity to frame the public plazas and squares.

Aurovilians don't want any form of development. But this is not true. It's just that the planners don't ask the right questions, they don't engage with people in the right debate."

So what is the way forward? Are there alternative approaches we should be considering?

"We are still at the experimentation stage, we cannot conclusively say this is how things should be," says Lata. "That's why we should be trying out small prototypes rather than undertaking major building."

Prashant reveals this was the original idea behind building a stretch of the Crown road. "We said we will build a short length in its entirety – not just the road but also the accompanying cycle paths, drainage and pedestrian seating

those positions for the system does not allow for anything other than an ideological rigidity."

"If this experiment is to succeed, it must come from the people. One of Auroville's most successful projects to date is the land management work, and that succeeded because it was an activity that everybody could identify with, and everybody could do it in their own way while adding to the entire picture. Now we need something similar for urban development."

"So as a community we need to identify what we want to do here, the core activities we want to nurture over the next 5–10 years on the basis, of course, of certain non-negotiables. For example, creating an urban society with a certain density pattern which allows

“Planning must be based on work, not feelings”

Town planners don't get an easy ride in Auroville. *L'Avenir d'Auroville*, the present planning and development organisation, like its predecessor, *Aurofuture*, has been criticised by those who feel that, among other things, the group lacks qualified people, it is too elitist in its approach, and it is unresponsive to planning suggestions which do not fit exactly with the Master Plan. Three of *L'Avenir*'s coordinators - Lalit, Sauro and Pino - explain the present state of town planning in Auroville as well as the particular challenges faced by Auroville planners.

Over the years there have been two very different approaches to building the city. At one extreme are those who believe that the essentials of the city have already been laid out in the original 'Galaxy' plan, which was drawn up by Roger and approved by Mother, and that the Aurovilians simply need to build it. At the other extreme are those who say that everything has to be discovered, that nothing can be imposed but that planning solutions will emerge 'organically'.

What is the approach taken by *L'Avenir d'Auroville*? "The approach of *L'Avenir*," explains Sauro, "is not that there is a plan that has to be implemented rigidly. Rather, there is a Master Plan which is an interpretation of the original Galaxy plan. This Master Plan gives broad directions. Now we have to see how they can be translated into reality."

Sauro doesn't believe that the differences are any longer between 'top-down' and bottom-up' approaches to planning. "Rather, the debate now is over different interpretations of the Galaxy. Those who criticise the Master Plan do it on the basis that it doesn't interpret the Galaxy correctly." According to Sauro, the main point of dispute is the roads. "The Master Plan is criticised from the point of view that the Crown Road and the ring road will break the dynamic lines of the Galaxy. Another point of discussion concerns population density. The Master Plan envisages that 40,000 people will live in the Residential Zone. Some people feel that the population should be spread more evenly throughout the Zones."

The dispute over the Crown

The road issue is particularly pertinent now as the first 400 metre stretch of the Crown Road from the Solar Kitchen to Arka has just been completed. Critics say this is planning by default: that there was no proper discussion in the community concerning the construction of this road and that now it is there other options are effectively eliminated. The detailed development plan (2003) makes the completion of the entire Crown Road one of the first priorities. Why is so much emphasis placed upon completing a road which didn't even feature in the original Galaxy plan?

"In my view," says Sauro, "the full implementation of the Crown Road will radically change the mobility situation in the city. When the radial roads are also in place, every key point in the city will be no more than thirty minutes walk from the Crown. Moreover, even without a critical mass of population, with a low investment in an electrical bus you can have a high frequency public service on this road."

However, *L'Avenir* is no longer pressing for the full completion of this road in the immediate future. The next step, as Pino describes it, is "urban massing" - developing the urban fabric of the city. "In Auroville at present you don't see one stretch where you can get that urban feeling, so for me the first priority is to create an urban structure."

Pino describes the basic concept. "The inner city is a peace area. There will be no big urban development inside this area for, as you approach the Matrimandir, little by little you should be taken into deeper silence. The Crown road is very important because it acts as a kind of buffer for the inner city. I hope one day it will be pedestrianised. If you are coming from other parts of the city or the Green Belt, you will park here and then you will go into the inner city either on foot or by cycle. So the urban structure will be outside the Crown, and especially in the Residential Zone."

New developments

"Now we are concentrating upon developing sectors one and two of the Residential Zone," explains Lalit, who coordinates *L'Avenir*'s urban planning activities, "because a certain concentration of development is already there in this proposed low density area and Auroville owns most of the land in this area. We want to move towards creating a more compact urban living environment compared to the earlier trend of scattered development. Lalit mentions that consolidation in this area will involve upgrading the infrastructure - studies are under way for a common water supply and treatment plant - which, in turn, will allow more housing and collective facilities to be constructed. Pino emphasises that we need to create guidelines, parameters, for how we will build in these sectors. "Once this development is completed, a large proportion of the Aurovilians will be living in this area," says Sauro.

In the next few years new projects are also planned to come up along the recently completed part of the Crown Road which is adjacent to these sectors. These projects include a library, an integrated healing centre, a WATSU centre and a multi-purpose building which will house offices, shops and a restaurant.

How many Aurovilians know about these planned developments? Recently, a short notice appeared in the Auroville News inviting community feedback on building permission for the new library. However, it lacked any accompanying information. This, according to a senior Aurovillian architect, is a totally inadequate way of presenting a proposed new public building to the community.

Community participation

This raises the question of wider participation in the planning process. For example, is *L'Avenir* willing to consider alternative proposals to those which it is developing for the town? One such proposal is the 'Crownways' initiative which was developed by the *Dreamcatchers*



Lalit and Sauro

group. What is its present status?

"It hasn't been rejected," says Sauro. "However, it was not finalised in time for it to be constructed utilising the recent Government grant. Money can be made available for it next year if the concept is ready and there is agreement upon it."

But a common perception is that projects like Crownways are not favoured by *L'Avenir* because they do not strictly follow the Master Plan. So how flexible is *L'Avenir*? Are certain elements of the Galaxy and Master Plan adhered to with an almost religious fanaticism by the planning group?

Sauro laughs. "I know a couple of people who may have given that impression. But our approach is more pragmatic. For me, the Crown is not sacred geometry: I see it in functional terms. It's not the shape of the Crown which is important but the fact that it will allow a certain level of concentrated urban development, traffic management and added mobility."

Lalit notes, however, that a planner needs parameters as guidelines for the work and that Roger himself had defined the essential features of the Galaxy Concept which should be included in any Master Plan. These include a population of 50,000; the four zones; Matrimandir with its gardens and lake; the Crown and city centre; the lines of force; and the fact that around 50% of the city area should be green. "He added that detailed city planning based on the Master Plan should be done in a spirit of experimentation and innovation and that there should be a search for beauty. These guidelines are sufficient for any planner. In a very good way they highlight the essentials while giving the freedom to explore."

Lalit explains that even these guidelines have undergone some evolution. "The original Galaxy plan did not have a round Crown. However, Jacqueline explained that later this concept was found to be a better solution. Similarly, the distribution of population has undergone some changes in the Master plan from the 1968 document explaining the Galaxy concept."

"Planning essentially deals with interlinked macro and micro aspects both in time and space, and in this context a guiding framework and step-by-step process would be helpful if we are to make further progress in effective planning and development. This can only happen in a very harmonious way if the required work goes into it. It is not likely to happen just by people expressing feelings of discontent. Not only Dr. Doshi but many professionals have repeatedly mentioned that a full-time qualified team is essential to work on different aspects of planning."

No worked-out alternatives

For Lalit, this is the key problem. "There are very few people who are working on design solutions at present. If someone has an holistic alternative to the present Crown design they should try and translate their ideas into proposals which highlight different interlinkages on a varying time scale. If need be, the help of experts can be sought to improve as well as evaluate the available alternatives. As Dr. Doshi said, planning discussions must be based on work, not feelings. Planning work requires a lot of time and commitment. It involves experimenting with different parameters, coming up with different scenarios then seeing how these are likely to impact the larger picture, and seeing what can be taken up for short-term development."

"However, with the exception of the Crownways group, which has been positively experimenting with the participation model, no alternative holistic planning level proposals have been put forward for the development of the city, in spite of the fact that Auroville has a number of talented professionals who have been showing keen interest in this activity. If the appropriate work is done and the new proposals make sense to all of us, fine, we can change."

But doesn't this limit the number of people who can participate in this work? Couldn't *L'Avenir* offer to work on alternative proposals if their proposers lack the necessary skills to translate them into planning documents?

Sauro is sympathetic. "If someone comes with a genuine planning alternative, you should be able to assist them, not tell them to go away and come back with a fully worked-out plan. The

problem is we don't have the staff in *L'Avenir* - we are not equipped to do a proper town planning work. At present only 1% of city budget goes to town planning and we have to rely on external donations to run the present office, which is totally understaffed from a planning point of view."

Pino agrees. "Since *L'Avenir* was constituted we have not been prepared for urban design. We don't have enough people - I have to work alone on urban design most of the time - and the result is we still do not have a good, detailed Master Plan for small-scale work."

One possible solution is outsourcing some of the work. After all, the Matrimandir was constructed with a great deal of help from outside experts. "I would like to work with someone like Dr. Doshi on the macro-level aspects of the plan so that the frame is clearer," says Lalit. "Then we can do micro-level work here. If we need to have specific studies done, we could also ask Dr. Doshi and other experts for help."

Participatory model to be evolved

"*L'Avenir* is meant to be a participatory body, but we have not been able to implement certain components of the participation aspect which had been envisaged when *L'Avenir* was constituted," recognises Sauro. Lalit is also looking for a model about how to improve participation. "Somehow planning in Auroville has evolved into a very sensitive and political topic. This is because planning calls for the synthesis of many different layers and, in our case, these layers include not only the Galaxy plan, ecology and socio-economic factors, but also the participatory and decision-making aspects of a dynamic society which is aiming at human unity."

"I think most people want to participate in planning in Auroville at the decision-making end of the process, to discuss, say, whether a road should be built or not. But this is the last stage. These decisions should come much later, after all the homework has been done."

So how long would it take to do the basic homework? Lalit estimates that with a good planning team the work could be completed in one to one and a half years.

But isn't there a danger that the planners come to look upon Auroville as simply a town planning project? Of mistaking the buildings for the city?

Sauro nods. "We have discussions as if Auroville is purely an architectural project but we don't consider why we have to build the city, why Mother wanted to build a city here."

So what was Mother's intention?

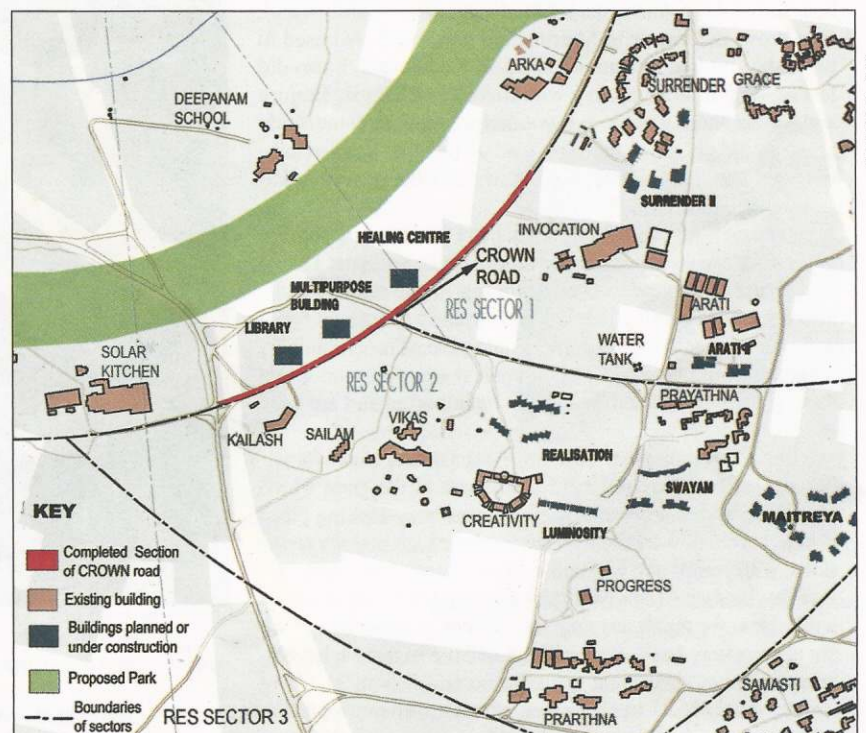
"Perhaps it is necessary to create a critical mass to build a society that has a common evolutionary ideal. But it's clear for me that the buildings do not come first. Auroville is the expression of a collective spirit of consciousness and the city will evolve out of that. At the same time, I'm aware that India is developing fast, that regional development is impacting us more and more, so we have to accelerate both our collective aspiration and the materialisation of the city."

"It is clear for us in *L'Avenir* that Auroville is not a town planning project," says Lalit. "The larger aim of Auroville is human unity, so the prime purpose of any activity in Auroville - and planning is one of them - is to help both individual self-realization and the development of the collective."

"If you understand Mother's vision for the township it is fantastic," says Pino. "It's a perfect habitat; a very beautiful small town which is very modern yet cosy, full of greenery yet providing perfect urban comfort. So, naturally, as an architect I would like to see this built."

"On the other hand, if it was constructed in 3-5 years I wonder if the right people would come to live here. My analysis is that Auroville has to go through a process; that Auroville has to be built inside us so that we are ready for the city. As an architect and planner I find it very frustrating that things go so slowly, but it is part of the game."

From interviews by Alan



Proposed developments in the next 5 years on the Crown and in sectors 1 and 2

"Those at the centre have to give guidance"

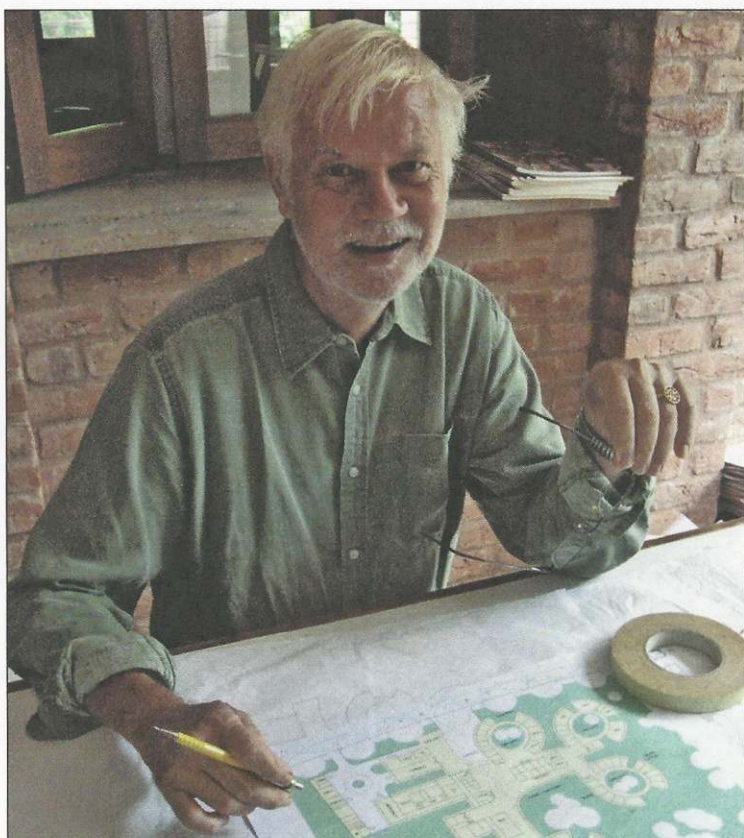
Helmut is a senior Aurovillian architect with an interest in town planning.

"There has been a problem with planning ever since I came to Auroville over thirty years ago," says Helmut. But why? And what exactly is the problem?

"According to my training and active experience the role of the Chief Town Planner is to create the structure to ensure a proper development of the township and guide the work of all collaborators. That didn't happen; Roger obviously defined his role differently. I think he considered himself foremost a designer of forms, sculpted objects and pleasing interiors – I admire him for his outstanding capacity for it – whereas, in my view, town planning needs a completely different approach. It is more the design of a process, the manifestation of an 'anchoring course of logic' (as Louis Kahn put it) for future development, making it as easy as possible for future architects to follow and coming generations to comply with.

"If this work has not been done, it is rather naïve to expect the Galaxy Plan to come up by itself. Actually, it is the surest way to prevent it. Since it is quite an unusual, highly innovative and complicated concept (compared to, say, the 'gridiron plan' of Pondicherry), people have no clue as how to accomplish it."

Helmut continues: "We find a good example if we look at a plan of the present housing development of Sector 2 in the Residential Zone. There is obviously no readable overall concept for the upcoming houses. The absence of guidelines has more or less forced the architects to place their buildings at random.



Helmut

Architects need a coordination agency and information on how to relate to the Galaxy plan. This would include information on the envisaged mobility system (since the street – and not the building – is the forerunner of development); on water, water conservation, energy; on building types and building heights, on scale and use of the spaces between the buildings and their landscaping; on pre-

ferred materials and colour in order to achieve an overall harmony etc. All this should have been properly laid down in a plan and building manual before inviting architects to come up with individual house designs, but this didn't happen.

"To compile, define and consciously integrate all this information for all the zones of Auroville, to make it presentable to a wider audience, to synthe-

size and arrive at decisions is a tremendous amount of work. It cannot be achieved solely on a committee level. Though seminars and participatory sessions like the work of the *Dreamcatchers* provide excellent ideas, they quickly vanish into the drawers of oblivion if they don't find a proper receptacle in the work of a firmly established planning department able to process them and to provide a counterpart and coordinating body for any outside input. To build up this structure in the form of a permanently team of professionals is the mandate of *L'Avenir* as I understand it. But till today it is absent."

But how is this basic information arrived at?

Helmut describes the typical planning process. "It always starts by documenting what is already there – the topography, climate, existing buildings, water situation etc. Then there is a proper analysis of what the situation suggests, of the possibilities and constraints. Next we have to ask ourselves 'What do we actually want, what is our vision?' leading us to formulate aims and objectives (and maybe lists of possible means to achieve them, much in the way the *Dreamcatchers* do it). Auroville's aims and objectives may include ecology, sustainability, aesthetic appearance, the materialisation of the Galaxy plan and the target aim of 50,000 inhabitants. They serve to form a constant reference, but can be changed and reviewed if further conclusions require it: it's always a learning process. For example, if we find that fitting 40,000 people into the Residential Zone is too difficult, we can reduce the figure later on and find a way

of accommodating the surplus in other parts of the city.

"Then, keeping our aims in mind, we would be ready to start working on alternative scenarios for each part of the city. At this stage it is beneficial to come up with a number of significantly different proposals in order to become clear about what the right option could be. The different options can be compared and evaluated using criteria derived from our aims and objectives. Finally a few plans would be submitted, along with a thorough documentation of how they were arrived at, to a wider audience for feedback and for making a final choice. (Participation should take place in a structured way parallel to professional planning.) When there is finally agreement on one particular plan and the planners have formulated their guidelines, architects can be invited to come in to do their work.

"So what we need now is a planning office with creative generalists and professionals who are output-oriented, who recognise what has to be done and go out and find the right ways and people to do it. I don't think it is too difficult to find them: it is still tremendously attractive to build the 'City of the Future'. But the precondition is a structure for how this department will function. The first person needed is a very competent urban designer and a general manager to build all this up.

"Once this is achieved and in running order, all Aurovillian architects who want to help in building the city can fit in easily. It's not too late, the chance is still there. That is what is so marvellous."

From an interview with Alan

PROFILE

"To serve each other as a big family – this is why we are here"

Kanniappan of the Abri Puncture and Repair Service explains why he is proud to be associated with one of the last 'free' services in Auroville.

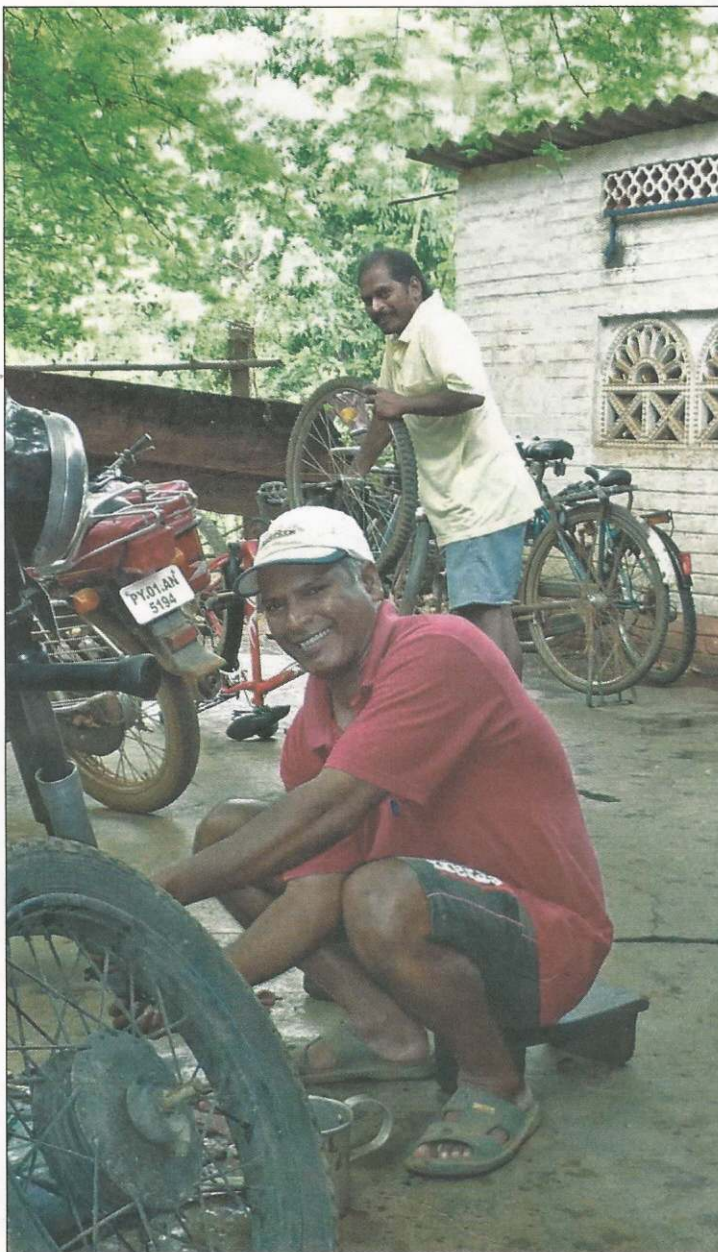
"I have always loved cycling," Kanniappan tells me as we sit on a log in a quiet corner of his busy Abri workshop. "When I was a boy in Edaiyanchavadi I used to cycle as far and as fast as I could. The roads were very different in those days, full of holes, but then there was no traffic to watch out for. It was so good in the old days," he says wistfully. "As teenagers we did lots of sports and worked harder. I am always telling them today to get away from their computers and cell phones and have some fun cycling in the forest, but they don't listen to me. Only in later years will they realize how important cycling and sports are to their good health.

"Cycling is also seen as a sign of poverty by many Tamils; it means that you cannot afford to buy a motorbike. My wife works in the Visitors Centre and she cycles to work, but both my children have motorbikes. After work I jump on my cycle and bike around the forest, or if I have a companion we may cycle 15 or 20 kilometres. When I was younger I used to do basketball, tennis and jogging, but now I have a knee injury I only cycle or walk. If I don't do any exercise I cannot sleep well as I don't feel good.

"When I was a boy I used to go to school in Aspiration for half a day then work half a day. I am now 48 years old and have had many jobs in Auroville. I started in the nursery with Narad, then drove the tractor in Matrimandir gardens. I also used to drive the children to summer camp in Kodaikanal. I also did lots of long distance cycling with friends to Chennai, Tanjore and Kerala and it was always wonderful to see the countryside as we would not go on the main roads. The bikes seemed to be stronger then and better quality. Nowadays the quality is less and they are much more costly.

"We do repair mountain bikes but I am not very fond of them; they are so expensive. A Chinese bike will cost 12,000 rupees and is not very well made for our Indian roads. Maybe in the future we will have someone trained in foreign bikes, with the correct tools. If people would give us mountain bike tools we would love to learn to repair them; you cannot buy these tools in India as they have to be imported and are very expensive."

I asked Kanniappan how the Abri Puncture and Repair Service started. "Around 1975, I was one of the team which began the Water Service." He points to a busy-looking place next to his small workshop. "That is where I learned my repair skills, with pumps and windmills. When I started the repair service my brother Arumugam joined me and now we share the work. Now we repair as many motorbikes as bicycles and we are always very busy. You will not believe it, but we have to bring our own water here from the Solar Kitchen! The bore well here only has a small amount of water. When people come to take their repaired bikes away I feel bad as we cannot clean them and I have to explain these to them."



Kanniappan (foreground) and Arumugam at the Puncture Repair service at Abri.

Four young lads are busily taking bikes apart. "I like to train boys to do repair work," Kanniappan explained. "I learned from others and now I like to pass on my learning.

How does he manage to service bikes over such a wide area? "It's not easy. We are limited with only having four boys here and having no vehicle to collect breakdowns: we have to carry in broken cycles on a motorcycle, which is difficult. My dream would be to have at least two or three more boys so we could help more people, but at present we cannot afford this."

So how do they manage financially? "I get a maintenance, as does my brother Arumugam. The boys' wages come to 10,000 rupees a month, which we have to pay ourselves. We have some regular sponsors like the American *Living Routes* students and a few individuals. We also do cycle maintenance for the Visitor's Centre and rent out mopeds to guests and this gives us some additional income.

"We have always kept to the rule that we charge only for materials: we do not charge for labour or puncture repairs. This is our principle and we are proud of it and hope very much we will be able to keep it this way. This is the only free service, apart from the Free Store, which still operates like this, and we think it is very important because this is what Auroville is all about. This is why we are here – to serve each other as a big family. Unfortunately now everything in Auroville is becoming more and more commercial and we are becoming like the outside world."

What about the future? Does he think that fewer and fewer people will be cycling around Auroville? "Auroville must become a Cycle City. It is the perfect place for it and would set an example to the rest of the world. When I visit Chennai to see my daughter and I see the crowds and pollution I think how blessed I am to live in this beautiful place. It just means we have to change our thinking. Of course, it would also help if we had good cycling paths to attract more people to ride, and a quick repair service as you can get a lot of punctures here with all the thorns on the ground.

"We have a good cycle club in Auroville and it would be nice to have a Tour de France here one day and involve many people..."

But aren't the Auroville roads rather dangerous? And doesn't this discourage cyclists? Kanniappan thinks for a minute. "I think it would be a good idea if we could teach road safety in the schools; that is the only way we will have better behaviour on the roads. Even I am too set in the old ways. I ride without lights on my bike as I know the way and think I can see in the dark. Until a few years ago all roads were narrow and you always felt you were in a village, even when you were in the town. That is why cyclists still ride two or three abreast, holding hands and talking into their cell phone. The change has happened so quickly that they cannot change with it."

Talking about change, after all these years wouldn't he like to do something else in Auroville? Kanniappan is adamant. "I want to work till my last breath in this service."

Dianna

The psychic being and the bursting of the veil

In the December 2008 issue of *Ritam*, the bi-yearly journal of Auroville's Sri Aurobindo International Institute for Educational Research, Aurovilian Alain Grandcolas published the results of a limited survey on the discovery of the psychic being. Six months earlier, Alain had published an essay in *Mother India*, a journal of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, on the psychic being materialising itself into the supramental being. *Auroville Today* talked to Alain to learn about his research.

Auroville Today: What made you do this work?

Alain: Firstly my profound interest in Sri Aurobindo's and The Mother's work and more specifically a specific interest in the psychic being. The discovery of the psychic being and the unification with it was not made a condition by The Mother for living in Auroville, but She very often referred to its necessity when speaking to Aurovilians. She gives the discovery of the inner being 'which ought to become the active centre of our being and life in Auroville' the place of first importance in her text 'To be a True Aurovilian.'

Secondly, I am very curious to know if the Supramental Manifestation, which The Mother said took place on February 29, 1956, has made it easier for people to find their psychic being. Before that date The Mother had stated that in almost every case, a very long effort is needed to become aware of one's psychic being and that one is lucky if one can do it in thirty years of sustained effort. But, in February 1973, after the Supramental Descent, She said to teachers of the Ashram School that, though usually it takes a whole lifetime to discover one's psychic (and for some people several lifetimes), in the present conditions it could be done in several months. I was wondering if that Supramental descent, which She described as "a new world having been born", has accelerated the blooming of the psychic being and its coming forward, even without a sustained effort in this life.

I decided to start a very limited survey. I asked some people if they had experienced the psychic coming forward and in what circumstances, how they experienced it physically, mentally or otherwise, and how long the after-effects of that experience remained.

Did the idea arise spontaneously or was it because you felt a change in atmosphere in Auroville?

The survey was not only amongst Aurovilians. Only a third of those interviewed were from Auroville; another third were Ashramites and the rest were outsiders.

Regarding a change in atmosphere: yes, I do see a change. During the so-called Golden Age of Auroville in 1972-73, when The Mother was physically present, we in Auroville were spending 70% of our time discussing designs and trying to get permission to implement them and there was much disagreement. The fact that The Mother was approachable was actually not a great help, for whenever Roger Anger would come back from Her with a reply,



Alain Grandcolas

with which we would disagree, we would say that Mother had been influenced by Roger. Now, 30 years later, I would say that we spend 70% of our time doing work and 30% on discussions about how to do it. I see a great progress how people interact with each other; I do believe that sometimes more of a psychic sweetness starts coming in.

Can you say something about the survey?

The topic of my research was the individual's sudden experience of the psychic. I interviewed 37 people. I selected 28 of them on account of the psychic sweetness I felt they radiate; the others because I thought they might have experienced the contact with their psychic. It happened that people were in the age groups between 20-30, 40-50, and 50 upwards. So the survey can certainly not be considered as giving any indication of the state of the psychic of the average Aurovilian.

And the results?

Out of the 37 people selected, 15 confirmed that they had had the experience of the psychic. Three of them said that the knowledge has always been there; for the other 12 the knowledge came through a sudden experience. The initial awareness lasted from some hours to some days or some months. Then it disappeared; for many it came back several times for a certain period, no longer in a dramatic way but in a soft and gradual manner. They said they could easily recognise it since the taste of the psychic being was already known.

I asked people about their experience using 10 parameters. Those who had the sudden psychic experience recognised 6 or 7 parameters; 2 parameters were recognised by all of them. These two were that the bursting of the veil was a sudden happening and not a progressive awareness, coming unexpected, without any reason – for example, not after weeks of strenuous meditation; the second was an explosion of joy which was not justified by any outward event. Other parameters

The Psychic Being and the sudden bursting of its veil appeared in the December 2008 issue of the magazine *Ritam*. The article deals with the growth and the life of the psychic being within oneself and the possible confusion between realizing the psychic and coming into contact with a part of the being that is under the psychic's influence. Then follow the findings of the survey: how people became aware of their psychic being, in what circumstances, and what experiences accompanied that discovery, e.g. an apparition or the rushing in of an important light. The article also describes the "reversal of consciousness" some people experienced and how that became manifest, and gives indications how one can make contact with one's psychic being.

Available from SAIER: saiier@auroville.org.in

The supramental being, a materialisation of the psychic being appeared in the July 2008 issue of the magazine *Mother India*. The article details with the transformation of the psychic being into the next species, how it will "materialise" itself and become the supramental being, based on Sri Aurobindo's writings and The Mother's talks and experiences. The article concludes with a personal spiritual fiction where the author discusses the role of the superman and a kind of chart for the advent of the supramental being. Available from *Mother India*: motherindia@sriau-robindoashram.com

The consolidated text of the two articles is available from Alain Grandcolas. For information, contact: alain@auroville.org.in

A 50-page essay with the consolidated and further augmented text of both articles will be published by the end of 2009 and may become available online.

included the perception of a 'being' within oneself; the perception of another reality which is more real than the physical body; the feeling of eternity – that the being has always existed and will always exist; and the experience of a sudden reversal of consciousness.

One person, an Aurovilian, had the experience while walking on a boulevard in Paris. Of course, I could not resist asking if that was the Boulevard St. Michel where The Mother had experienced the coming forward of Her psychic being. But it was another boulevard!

It was also interesting to see that more younger people had experienced the psychic coming to the front than older people.

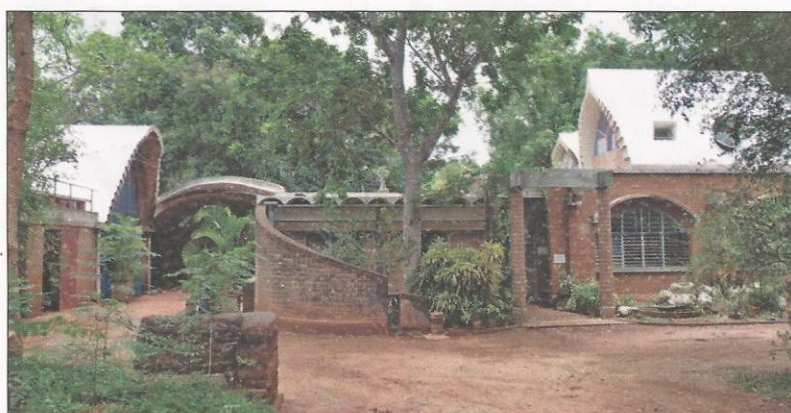
Is this survey indicative of a trend?

This cannot be said. A larger and more scientifically set-up survey would be required, which might confirm but also contradict some of the findings. I have not yet decided to start a new and wider survey.

In conversation with Carel

MILESTONE

The Auroville Earth Institute celebrates two decades



The Auroville Earth Institute premises in Auroshilpam

August 31, 2009 marked the 20th anniversary of the Auroville Earth Institute (AEI). To celebrate the event, a presentation was given at the Multimedia Centre. A few days later, the Auroville Earth Institute also organised an open house.

The Auroville Earth Institute has become one of the world leaders in earth architecture. Since a few years it is the representative for Asia of the UNESCO Chair Earth Architecture, Constructive Cultures and Sustainable Development.

Summarizing AEI's work over these 20 years, Satprem Maini, the unit's executive, recalled that AEI has done major work researching and developing cost and energy effective stabilised earth technologies. It also developed the *Auram* machine for building with earth, which is now sold worldwide. AEI demonstrated building with earth in Auroville in the Visitor's Centre, Deepanam School, Vikas community, its own premises and more recently in the Realization Community. Elsewhere in India and abroad, AEI built places of worship – temples and a mosque, social housing projects, community centres and schools. AEI also developed a specialisation in disaster-resistant building technologies, which gained the approval of three governments.

The Auroville Earth Institute has also involved itself in training nearly 6,000 people from 62 countries on earth architecture and technologies through hands-on courses both in India and abroad. AEI has also given consultancy for various projects for the United Nations, and other governmental and non-governmental organisations. It has issued 32 publications on earth architecture and technologies and has been the recipient of one international and eleven Indian awards.

Among the recent activities of the AEI are designing and supervising the construction of a library for a secondary school in Tanzania, a

project that will be completed by the end of 2009. The project, which involves training construction workers, has received such an enthusiastic response that local authorities are now discussing using this material and technology to build two new townships with 2,000 houses.

Another recent activity was training engineers of the Department of Education and the Institute of Technology in Kathmandu, Nepal, in earth technologies. This project was a follow-up of the school built in 2008 over a span of 20 days at Jantanager in Nepal, as part of a project of the Department of Education to build 50,000 classrooms in the next 5 years. AEI will supervise the building of the first prototype school in Kathmandu in November 2009.

In India, the Auroville Earth Institute is active in the remote Spiti valley in Himachal Pradesh where it trained masons and built a two-room health clinic. The Auroville Earth Institute has also been involved in this region for 5 years, working on the restoration of a 12th century Buddhist temple and training people to build with compressed stabilised earth blocks.

EDUCATION



PHOTO COURTESY SMITI

Three Auroville high school students – from left: Smity Arpi (Last School), Maya Martens (Future School) and Shrishti Dangli (Last School) – represented Auroville at the Second International Youth Symposium on Biodiversity in Ottawa, Canada from July 4th – 9th 2009. This is the second time that Auroville students have participated in the International Youth symposium on biodiversity. For a transcript of their talk visit the Auroville website at: http://www.auroville.org/environment/student_presentation.htm

PASSINGS

On July 25th, Aurovilian Claude Charpie left his body after a long struggle with cancer. Claude, who had Swiss nationality, joined Auroville in 1993 and had just turned 72.



Claude Charpie

After several years of stewarding Meadow, he moved to the beach community of Repos. He worked with the lighting team of Bharat Nivas during cultural activities in the Sri Aurobindo Auditorium.

Ashramite Yvonne Artaud passed away on August 5th at the age of 85. She will be remembered by many from the early days of Auroville, for her work on the journal "Equals One" and as founder of the Equals One School, which was attended by quite a few



Yvonne Artaud

Auroville children before Aspiration School opened in December 1971. She was officially in charge of Auroville Education for a short time around 1972-73. From late 1976 to mid-1978 she and her partner Medhananda lived in Fraternity, before founding the Identity Research Institute in Reddiarpalayam.

PHOTOS COURTESY MAUNA

The inspiration behind the film was a remarkable 85 year old, Francis Rothluebber. Francis was formerly the director of Columbiere Retreat Center in Idyllwild, California and president of the School Sisters of St. Francis, an international Franciscan community of more than 1,050 sisters and associates headquartered in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. She recently founded *New Momentum for Human Unity*, whose purpose is to create a better life on this planet through the evolution of consciousness and the transformation of human relationships.

Francis wanted to present Auroville as a living demonstration of the power of conscious unity and she arranged for some current and former residents of Auroville to participate in a panel discussion after the showing of the film. A few weeks later, *Auroville Today* spoke to some of those who had participated in the event: Deepti Tewari, Jean-Yves Lung and Julian Lines, the current Chairperson of Auroville International.

What inspired Francis to make this film about Auroville?

Deepti: She had an experience, a vision, of The Mother which led Francis to promise to present Her dream of human unity, Auroville, to the world (see box). So, on her last visit to Auroville (she'd been here twice before) she brought a team of professionals to make the film. None of us had seen it before the conference. The film is still a work-in-progress; it was merely a rough cut that was shown to the audience.

How did you respond to the film?

Julian: When I heard it would be a 90 minute film, I was very concerned. I had never met these people and I wondered if they were going to mix in their vision with Auroville's vision – and we all know about America's capacity for making a New-Age burger! So I woke up on the morning of the conference with contradictory feelings. Everyone I trusted had confidence that Francis and her team were good people with the right approach. However, the capacity to

Recognising fellow-travellers

On 27th July, a one day conference on human unity was held in Chicago. One of the purposes of the conference was to premiere a new film on Auroville called *City of the Dawn*.



From left to right: Bhavana, Deepti, Francis and Julian

get the story wrong is almost infinite.

But the movie vindicated everything. There was no ego; the movie-makers didn't put themselves forward or interpret Sri Aurobindo in their own way.

Deepti: At end of the film we all found it difficult to speak, we were so moved. The approach was different from so many films about Auroville. In the film, instead of asking us about what we were doing in Auroville, Francis asked us questions like, 'What do you think Mother would say if She saw Auroville today?' Her questions (as also the rest of the team's) were deep, forcing us to stop and reflect.

Almost all the Aurovilians in the film touched upon the spiritual aspect. My sense is that films often present the materiality of Auroville and less the spirit because we are not so confident about this aspect and are afraid of sounding merely preachy. But here was a group which came along and said, 'We're going to present the vision'. And because they presented the spirit what came

through was startlingly good. I came away with the sense of a strong reminder: 'That's why I'm there, that's what I came for, that's what makes it all worthwhile!'

Jean-Yves: The movie also shows how deeply engaged the Aurovilians are; that it's a complete commitment to an adventure into which you put all your resources, your whole life, even though you don't know what is going to happen. That came through very well.

What also comes across is that Auroville is not just a local, exotic experiment: it touches the heart of the human condition. So wherever you are on the Earth you should be concerned by the adventure of Auroville because it is dealing with the key question facing humanity – are we able to change or not?

Deepti: I think that's the key point. By focussing upon the spirit behind it rather than the material aspects of Auroville, the makers of the film universalized Auroville's present actuality.

How did the audience respond?

Julian: The film is not yet in its final form – it clearly requires some editing – so the film team invited detailed feedback from the audience. People found the film inspirational. During the panel discussion about human unity, I was interested that nobody directed any questions at the key-note speaker, Bette Sue Flowers, who collaborated on four books with Bill Moyers, a well-known broadcaster. Instead, everybody wanted to hear from the Aurovilians. Perhaps it is because the audience, which was largely made up of Christian women, was mainly concerned with the spiritual aspect.

Was that a difficult audience to relate to?

Deepti: I hadn't expected to be speaking to such an audience. But something about the organizers had filled me with confidence. Francis is an exceptional person, like a very wise Elder. She doesn't say much but whoever she touches, she leaves changed. In fact, all the women one met there were beings

of energy and power and joy and love. My impression of a lot of Christianity has been that it is very burdened – but we didn't come across that atmosphere.

Because Joan Kaepplinger (who came with Francis on her visits to Auroville) is a key member of New Momentum as well as a Sister at Misericordia, the venue for the conference was this unique residential facility run by sisters from Misericordia Heart of Mercy – a place for people with developmental disabilities such as Down's Syndrome. It is a joyful place, full of light, and they are doing wonderful work. Every 'resident' has a particular need or way of being and this is addressed with consciousness and respect. The aim of Sister Rosemary, the head of Misericordia, is perfection – everything done has to be perfect – and this reminded me so much of The Mother. I'm grateful to have encountered people at the other end of the world whom I can wholeheartedly respect and who so enriched me.

As for presenting Auroville which is, in many ways, post-religion, the audience didn't seem to have any trouble with that.

Jean-Yves: I think they have gone beyond the question of creed. They are more interested in the experience of joy and love and perfection.

Deepti: They threw off their nuns' habits thirty years ago! I'd forgotten that our audience was largely practicing Christians until a woman came to me wanting to know whether Auroville would have issues if she wanted to do Mass there!

Julian: I was remembering Teilhard de Chardin, Thomas Berry, Ruud Lohman and others like them who had been Catholic priests. These were people totally unencumbered by dogma. They were living and integrating the heaven on earth of Christian tradition and were connecting to people on a heart level. And you feel that same kind of thing with Francis. She is a mature seeker who doesn't care about the labels and finds in Sri Aurobindo and The Mother the fulfilment of all of her dreams.

So my shorthand for this is that there is no trademark on the supramental: it's acting in so many ways that we may not see. I'm just happy to recognise fellow-travellers who come right from the heart of their own tradition and who do their work as an offering and with the right consciousness.

Deepti: I don't imagine that anybody who came to that conference will actually come to Auroville. Rather, the film will open up something in people. Chip Duncan, the independent film maker and cinematographer of *The City of the Dawn*, remarked that many people lack hope. They feel the world is heading towards disaster; they don't believe that humanity can create a world of truth and goodness. So, perhaps when they hear that a bunch of crazy people in South India are ready to give their lives for this, something may change in them. This is what this film should do – it should give people hope.

And that's how the Aurovilians in the film came across, as a bubbling, energetic, hopeful bunch of people. Finally, it seems to be not so much what we as Aurovilians do but that we have this great evolutionary 'yes' that guides our lives. And that's a promise for humanity.

From an interview by Alan

Francis's story

In the Fall of 1996 as I was on a flight to Chicago I was stunned by the presence of a woman standing near the exit at the front of the cabin. It seemed the sun was flooding her with the light. At the same time I heard deep inside, "My name is Mirra."

I had seen Mother Meera in Talheim, Germany. This was not she. I looked out the window, puzzling, and when I looked back the woman was gone. The experience was inexplicable so I let it go and returned to reading. Later I wondered whether I had really seen the woman, but I could never deny the voice.

Little did I realize the turn my life was taking that day. Shortly after I returned home, a retreat guest, a Methodist minister, shared her experience of a visit to Pondicherry and offered to show me The Mother's picture which she carried with her. She had seen The Mother standing at the stop of the stairs at the Ashram and she said she felt a flow of love from The Mother deeper than anything she had ever experienced.

When I saw the photo and read the opening line of a beaten-up little book, "Mirra Alfassa was born in Paris. February 21, 1878," I knew.

Suddenly books arrived unsolicited: *The Mind of the Cells*, then Satprem's volume one of *The Mother*. I began the study of Sri Aurobindo's *The Life Divine*. I was amazed at the parallels with the thought of Teilhard de Chardin and his writings on the evolution of consciousness. A friend and I decided to go to Pondicherry in 1998 for a month. I was going to make an intense study of Sri Aurobindo's life and work. The message I received at the Samadhi was to meditate.

When we returned I began an intense study, facilitated workshops on the themes, and in 2001 created *The Great Secret*, a collection of six reflections and meditations on *The Life Divine*. Later in 2004 I offered the workshop experiences on evolutionary spirituality in a small book, *The Upstart Spring*.

In 2004 it became evident that I was to move from the Meditation Center where I had been living. But I could not find a fitting place to rent. Several days before Christmas, I sat at my desk and began a conversation with The Mother. I asked her to find me a place and then was prompted to add, "If you find me the right place by January 1, I will pick up that piece of writing that I had started and forgotten." In 72 hours I rented the "perfect" place.

The piece of writing was about Auroville. During our first trip we had visited Auroville twice and meditated in the magnificent whiteness of the Matrimandir. The more I read of this laboratory of the future, the more I was intrigued. I thought the story should be told as a sign of hope and had begun a script that could be read as an imaginative experience of Auroville. When I shared the experience with a film-maker friend, Chris, we decided to create the film, not just publish the script.

We didn't have the money. We had to create a non-profit organization so people who contributed could receive a tax credit. We established the Board of *New Momentum for Human Unity* and we began to secure funds and to complete a working script.

In 2006, Joan, Chris and I returned to Auroville to obtain permission to do the film and to meet with Aurovilians to learn of their experience directly. After a brief challenging conversation, we were received everywhere graciously and were given every encouragement.

We returned to Auroville with the film crew in 2008 and in June 2009 had the first presentation of the film, *City of the Dawn*. The final version will be completed and available for distribution in September.

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