

AUROVILLE

TODAY

December 1994, Number Seventy-One

The Collective Housing Challenge

"Collective housing". The term conjures up images of grey, State-built apartment blocks under totalitarian skies. But it doesn't have to be like that. Today in Auroville, for example, a number of collective housing projects have either been completed or are underway in the Residential Zone of the city (for the names see page 3)—and none of them are high-rise or uniform in design. In fact, 'collective housing' in Auroville is a rather misleading term, because it is used to cover not only individual row-housing, but also apartment blocks with both self-contained units and units with shared facilities.

Why this new impetus for collective housing after years of individualistic construction? It's due to various factors, including recent land purchase and consolidation in the Residential Zone which has made

possible the construction of macro-projects; a new spirit of collaboration between architects and city planners which has culminated in the first comprehensive urban plan for the Residential Zone; and the increasing readiness of Aurovilians and Newcomers to embark upon a collective living experience as the limitations of individual housing situations become increasingly obvious. Above all, however, it is based upon the realisation that if we are to solve the present accommodation crisis, and to build Mother's city of 50,000 people upon a limited land mass, there is no alternative to relatively high-density accommodation.

The potential advantages of collective housing projects are numerous. They include reduced construction costs per unit, the releasing of individual house-builders from the arduous task of supervising the

construction of their new homes, a more efficient use of infrastructure, the possibilities of rich social interaction, greater security, and, on the macro-scale, the achieving of a critical mass of population which will allow more and more collective facilities to become viable for the community as a whole. Since collective housing tends to be less 'personalised', it may also encourage accommodation exchanges and a certain consciousness shift away from individual attachments towards the collective. In this sense, collective living seems to be very much in line with Mother's intentions for Auroville.

If the move from individual to collective housing can be seen as part of a larger and necessary paradigm shift in the community, it also involves radical new challenges. For simplicity's sake, these can be subsumed under three main headings:

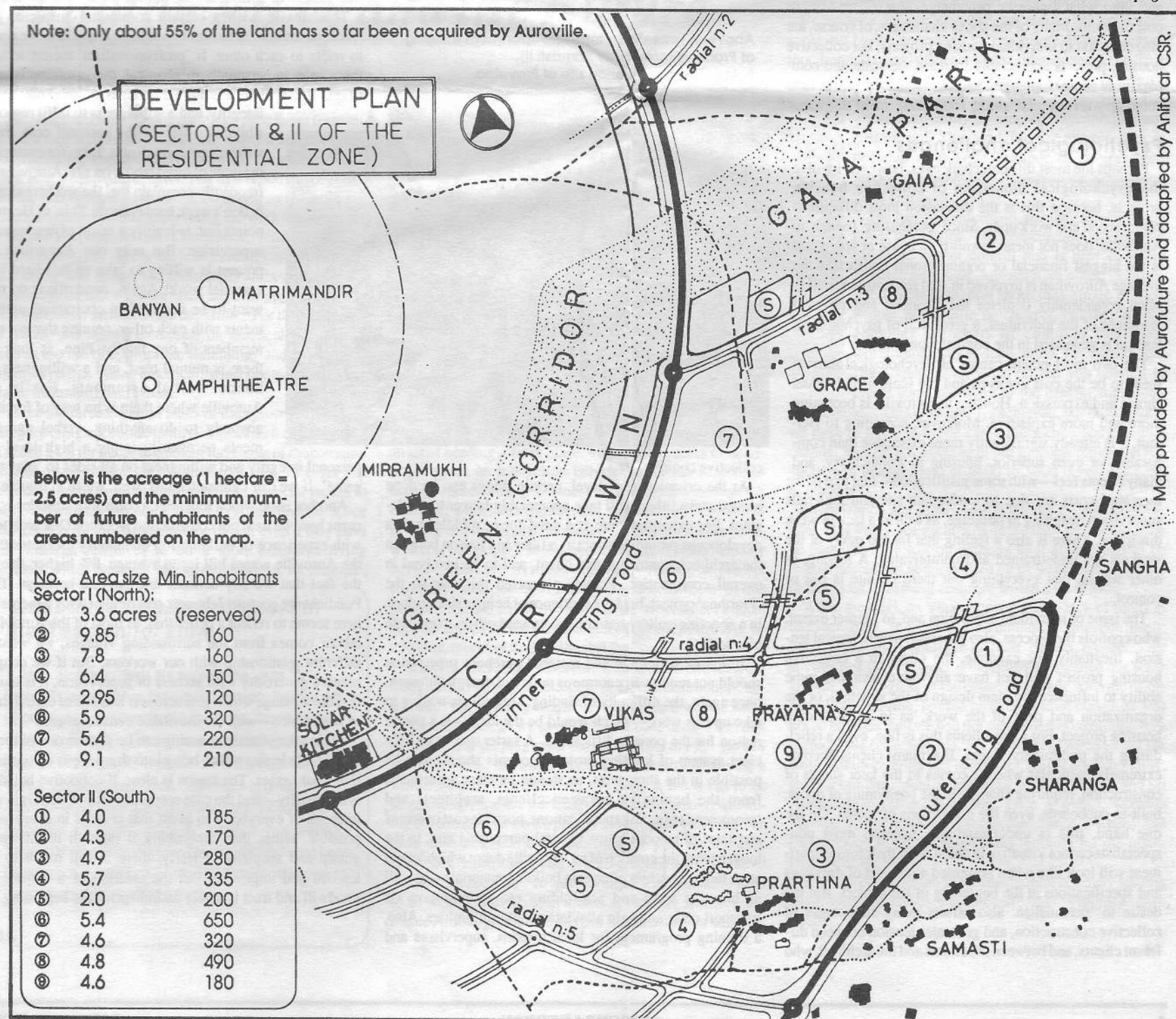
design, organizational and psychological challenges.

Design challenges

The design challenges primarily relate to architects and city planners. On the macro level, they involve the overall planning of the Zone, including matters like traffic circulation, the alignment of infrastructure, the relative density of different parts of the zone, maximum elevations of buildings, and, crucially, some guidelines concerning how the designs of different collective housing projects, which have now been allocated to different Auroville architects, can be harmonised.

Regarding separate collective housing projects, the design challenges for the architect include how to combine privacy with the possibility of social contact, how to allow the 'personalization' of space

(continued on page 2)



CHALLENGE... (continued from front page)

within the context of a unified structure, and how to create a 'sustainable' collective environment regarding waste disposal, water recycling, soil conservation etc.

Organizational challenges

The organizational challenges of collective building relate to matters like funding, accounting, site management and communication between the various parties involved. The latter can be a particularly tricky problem because a collective housing project may involve so many different components: the client, the architect, the contractor, the funding agency, the Housing Group, Auroville Fund etc. In fact, most architects involved in collective housing projects in Auroville do not want to deal with the organizational aspect of the project, as trying to satisfy the needs of different clients, ordering materials or keeping accounts—all of which architects have done in the past for individual clients—are too complex and time-consuming on projects of a collective scale. The result so far has sometimes been a lack of clarity about who is in overall control, and who bears the ultimate responsibility for the project if things start to go wrong.

Other organizational challenges relate to how to fund collective housing projects, since pre-funding is favoured by the architects but is very difficult to obtain; control over the purchasing and use of construction materials; supervision of the labour force; and efficient accounting techniques that are able, for example, to show cost overruns very fast. Organizational challenges also relate to the need for each client to know, at the beginning of a project which is not pre-financed, approximately how much they will need to pay, exactly what they are getting for their money, how far, if at all, they can suggest changes in the design, and who will bear responsibility—up to what figure or percentage—for cost overruns. Many of the above challenges, of course, are also common to individual housing projects; but collective housing projects appreciably increase the scale and complexity of these challenges, and may force the initiators to come up with new accounting and management structures.

Psychological challenges

Perhaps the most difficult challenges, however, involve the psychological dimension of collective housing projects, because this is the dimension most difficult to comprehend and work upon. Since 'purchasing' (which, in Auroville, does not mean 'owning') a house or apartment is the biggest financial or organizational transaction the average Aurovilian is involved in, and since such an outlay often considerably depletes the financial and physical resources of the individual, a great deal of psychological tension is generated in the construction process.

The two most potent causes of psychological tension seem to be the cost involved and the issue of individual choice and expression. Housing in Auroville is becoming more and more expensive. Moreover, according to Helmut, it is already significantly more expensive than comparable, or even superior, housing in Pondicherry, and many clients feel—with some justification—that part of the increased costs are due to inadequate site and materials supervision, resulting in pilferage, as well as a lack of work discipline. There is also a feeling that far too many of the workers are undertrained and unmotivated. A feeling, in other words, that everything out there on site is out of control.

The issue of individual expression and, to a lesser extent, who controls the process, also generates psychological tension. Inevitably, for example, the client in a collective housing project will not have anywhere near the same ability to influence the main design of the structure, or the organization and pace of the work, as in an individual housing project. For many clients this is fine, even a relief, during the preliminary stages. But many clients become extremely particular when it comes to the later stages of construction, requiring changes in the positioning of doors, built-in cupboards, even the dimensions of rooms. On the one hand, this is understandable, because most non-specialists cannot visualize in detail what their future apartment will look like when presented with a set of drawings and specifications at the beginning of the project. But the desire to 'personalize' also offsets many advantages of collective construction, and generates tension between different clients, and between the clients and the architect, who

has to balance individual desires against the advantages of 'mass' construction; interpersonal and communication skills are at a premium in situations like these. On the other hand, architects may need to work much harder to come up with simple, cost-effective designs that address the needs of individual clients within a collective complex.

These are some of the main challenges of collective housing.

Possible Solutions?

What are the solutions? In this context, it has to be stressed once again that we are in the early days of collective housing in Auroville, and consequently at the beginning of the learning curve. Still, some possible solutions have already emerged. Design-wise, for example, the first detailed urban plan for the Residential Zone, which has recently been drawn up, should help architects and planners by locating the sites of different housing projects, and by laying down basic guidelines for density, the maximum height of buildings etc. At the level of different collective housing projects, the experiences of the 'Vikas', 'Prarthna' and 'Grace' projects have thrown up different ideas regarding noise insulation and creating individual space within a



Above: A recently completed apartment building at Prarthna (previously Samasti II).
Below: The construction site of Prayatna.
Photos: John Mandeem.



collective context.

At the organizational level, certain things can be done immediately, others will take appreciably longer to implement. For example, there is a need for a 'middleman', a developer or promoter, to act as a filter and liaison between the architect, contractor and client, and to be involved in overall coordination. Francis pioneered this role in the 'Prarthna' project, but his experience of being a sitting-duck in a shooting-gallery has not encouraged others to emulate him so far.

Similarly, better site and material purchase supervision should not require an enormous outlay of energy although, once again, the difficulty of finding Aurovilians willing to take up this work—which would be the ideal—is a potent reason for the present difficulties. A faster and more efficient system of keeping project accounts should also be possible in the short term, as should be clear agreements from the beginning between clients, architects and 'promoters' regarding specifications, possible cost overruns and lines of responsibility. Central purchasing and, in the longer-term, the creation of an Auroville depot which would store large quantities of certain building materials—as well as hire out tools and scaffolding etc—would save on transport costs and help alleviate supply difficulties. Also, a training programme for local masons, supervisors and

purchasers, leading to some certification of competence, may help raise the skills and supervisory level on site, although experience suggests that many of these newly-trained workers may then seek employment in Pondicherry or further afield.

A more intractable problem concerns finance. Auroville architects agree that pre-financing a collective housing project, and then offering individual houses or apartments 'off the shelf' is the ideal, since it avoids hassles with clients over design modifications, cost overruns etc. But loans from banks or finance corporations are difficult to come by. Other longer-term possibilities include the creation of an Development Fund, financed by Auroville productive units and by donations, or the issuing of bonds which could be redeemed at some future date with attractive interest. Since considerable sums would be involved—the smallest collective housing projects at present would require 20 or 30 lakhs (200 to 300,000 rupees) 'up front' money—it would also make sense to create an Auroville Housing Corporation which could exercise overall financial supervision and approach Auroville businesses etc. on behalf of individual promoters.

The challenges which are hardest to resolve, however, are the result of those attitudes and unspoken assumptions which permeate the Aurovilian collective unconscious. For example, one of the consequences of the strong individualistic ethic which operates here is that there is a certain lack of communal awareness, coupled with an unwillingness to take up certain communal responsibilities. For example, all the architects involved in communal construction have felt, to a greater or lesser degree, unsupported by the larger community in their work; at times they have even been victims of criticism and innuendo. Of course, the architects are not entirely blameless. As one of them points out, young, relatively inexperienced architects in the West would never be able to take on the ambitious projects they are allowed to undertake in Auroville, and a certain refusal to acknowledge and learn from achievements elsewhere in the world makes almost every new construction here something of an experiment; the clients, of course, are the guinea-pigs.

This ties in with a certain communal suspicion of 'professionalism' as being alien to the spirit of how we want to relate to each other. If 'professionalism' means something cold, impersonally mechanical, the suspicion is justified. But if it means high standards of workmanship,

integrity, and a willingness to fulfil responsibilities whatever the personal cost, then we can't get enough of it. Take, for example, the issue of hired labour on site. Aurovilians frequently complain that the workers simply don't work hard enough. This, as Helmut points out, is mainly a result of inadequate supervision. But only one Aurovilian at present is willing to take up this hard but essential work! Again, Aurovilians do not want to be involved in contractual agreements with each other, arguing that we are members of one family. Fine, as long as there is mutual trust, and a willingness to honour verbal agreements. For in an Auroville where there is no way of forcing anybody to do anything, verbal agreements necessarily imply a high level of

personal integrity and willingness on all sides to 'play the game'. If we can't guarantee this, well, we're in trouble.

Another issue which touches on collective attitudes concerns how we treat our construction workers. One architect with experience of building in Pondicherry estimates that the Auroville wages bill is, on average, 8% higher, due to the fact that we pay bonuses and provide holidays. The Pondicherry contract labourer gets neither. Our generosity here seems to reflect a belief that, as most of the Auroville labour comes from the surrounding villages, we want a different relationship with our workers. But if we couple relative generosity with laxness of supervision, it is likely that the message which gets across is less one of caring than of negligence—with the inevitable consequences.

All in all, collective housing can be seen as one of those implacable lenses which bring into sharp focus our collective weaknesses. The lesson is clear. If collective housing is a necessity—and the case seems proven—then it is in the interests of everybody to assist that process in every way possible, rather than ambushing it through ill-informed gossip and suspicion. Clearly, there is still much to be learned and improved. But the creation of a climate of goodwill and trust is surely an indispensable beginning.

Alan

“None of us are city planners”

The original idea for the group housing project in 'Grace' was to use modular building elements (e.g. fixed dimensions of precast beams and slabs) already employed in existing constructions in 'Grace', in combination with a range of standard details and specifications from which the future occupants could choose according to their preferences. This would have kept down costs by speeding up and simplifying design and construction-supervision, while allowing quite a wide variety of individual designs.

However, it has not proved possible to adhere to this principle, and Helmut has even begun to doubt that it can be done simply and inexpensively because of the widely varying demands of Auroville clients, unless, that is, a promoter or developer first screens the client's wishes, checks the cost consequences, and then gives clear directives to the architect.

Nevertheless, Helmut is quite responsive to individual tastes and needs. Success for him means, "a building which fits the needs of all the people who have to live in it, without imposing a particular architectural style, so that everybody can develop their own lifestyle. We should provide accommodation that is flexible, allowing people to add a room or two later, if required. If desired, only the unfinished structure can be provided (including external doors and windows, outer finish as well as infrastructure) for the client to finish according to his own taste and budget. Moreover, group-housing should allow a choice between social interaction and privacy at any time. For example, each apartment would have a small kitchen, but there should also be a well-organised common kitchen where people can eat together if they wish." He adds, "In the Residential Zone, I

HELMUT is an Auroville architect who has designed individual houses both in Auroville and Pondicherry. However, he feels that the era of individual house-building in Auroville is coming to an end, and he is working at present on a 'group housing' complex in his community, 'Grace'.

don't mind if residents use a community just for eating and sleeping, because I think it's really necessary to provide accommodation for people whose main priority is working for Auroville as a whole."

Helmut believes that there is at present an accelerated and "very interesting phase of learning about architecture in the community". He concedes, however, that all the available knowledge is not readily shared, and agrees that it would be wonderful if there was more architectural teamwork in Auroville. "It would be good if the architects could get together once a month or so to present and discuss their work with each other. At the same time it shouldn't turn into 'designing by committee' which I feel is happening at present with our approach to urban design."

Helmut points out that a good overall urban design concept is essential for architects, as it establishes the frame within which creativity can be exercised, the theme upon which the variations can be played. "Unfortunately, none of us in Auroville are city-planners. We have the Galaxy concept, but so far no guidelines, no manual for building it. Those radial spaces converging on Matrimandir would

create distinctive urban spaces, giving Auroville an unmistakably characteristic form - as the canals do for Venice or Amsterdam, or the steep sloping roads for San Francisco. But the underlying idea still needs to be elaborated in detail—such things can't just happen by themselves."

What, then, is involved in urban design? "Essentially, what it means is providing the ground rules for building up the city—rules which are clear enough and yet flexible enough to carry over to a new generation of designers, builders and users." These rules are based upon an overall concept or idea about the function of the city, and are expressed through such things as zoning regulations, which govern the heights and types of buildings in particular areas, space use (built and unbuilt spaces and the relations between them), traffic circulation patterns etc. "In the context of the Auroville city plan, apart from these more technical concerns, a deep understanding and appreciation of the basic conceptual idea and of its implications in detail is helpful - and not only on the side of the planners. At the moment, it seems to me, there is some confusion, a rather superficial understanding. The vision is not yet 'grounded' enough to manifest in the desired form. Half of the town-planner's duty (unless he is backed by a dictator) is to design the planning process—meaning who is to be consulted and how decisions are to be taken—as well as the implementation process. In Auroville this seems to be rather difficult. However, one of the main things to be dealt with immediately is motorised traffic, because I am sure that like so many other towns we will be dominated by motorised traffic in the future, unless we have a very clear concept about how to control it."

Within the past month, the Development Group has come up with a planning proposal for the Residential Zone (see page one). Although Helmut feels that this hasn't come to grips with the potential traffic problem, he welcomes it as "a first step—now at least we can start working out the infrastructure for the Zone."

Based upon a conversation with Alan

Building Vikas and the Future

Vikas (which means Progress) began in 1992 as a "collective and alternative living project using appropriate technology". As a permanent feature of the actual residential zone of the "city", it attempted to materialize the vision of a collective life according to the spirit of the Auroville Charter. The first residents lived on the site and formed their own team acting as client, contractor and architect and supervising the work themselves.

Vikas has a published set of intentions. "Vikas is a place for collective life where each individual can grow harmoniously and enrich the collectivity through their individuality. In this way, we shall have an opportunity to materialize our aspiration for the Truth." For the residents of Vikas, this means consensus on practical guidelines such as the use of appropriate technology and renewable energy systems (solar electrical, wind pump, biological waste treatment), and others.

There are three different plans of flats proposed for each category (single, couple, family) with a fixed cost to which is added 21% for the development fund (cost of the common infrastructure within the community), and 12% for the solidarity fund (to assist those with less financial means to join). Individuals are not allowed to go beyond the space size allotted for the particular type of flat, even if they have the financial resources to build more extensive living quarters, unless there is a special requirement; for example,

Collective housing projects in the Residential Zone

Most housing projects are ongoing like Vikas. Only Samasti I is completed, but Grace I is nearly finished with its extensions, and then Grace II will start. Prarthna (previously Samasti II) is occupied but still needing finishing touches. Prayatha, the replacement of the Matrimandir Camp, is nearing completion. Sayellaam (a group from Aspiration) has funding and is marked out. Victory and Surrender are still only plans. A "Golconde"-type residence (Golconde is an Ashram guest-house in Pondicherry) has been proposed, and Rolf (Sumark Construction) is discussing pre-packaged residential housing.

PHOTO JOHN MANDEN



Apartment building at Vikas, for an experiment in collective living

an artist needing a work place. The whole process of building requires an interaction between members of a community rather than a business or client relationship. "A client [in a business transaction] will normally attempt to give the minimum and demand the maximum. This trend, which is developing in Auroville, breeds fear and anxiety between the Aurovilians trying to realize a project together," mentioned Aurosaprem, the initiator of the project. "Unless all the members of the process feel mutual support and carry the responsibility together, there will be tensions, mistakes and all the rest."

Looking back, Aurosaprem, who is an architect from CRATerre (France) specialized in earth construction, observed: "The building would have cost less if we had had a contractor. Though we saved the 15% contractor's fee, tool purchase and keeping track ourselves costs more." He still feels, however, the importance and necessity of having a working team responsible for the project, but it has to be large enough that the work does not become an overwhelming burden for one single person as happened in Vikas. The team also needs to have Aurovilians who are masons, plumbers, electricians and working along with the hired workers on the site. "To build a city, there definitely have to be more Aurovilians involved in building work," comments Aurosaprem. "We have to have a common workers'

policy, organized materials supply (now we're at the mercy of lorry drivers!), and an accepted master plan of the city."

Recently, a master plan for the residential zone was approved by the concerned groups of architects, contractors, Land Service, planners and residents (see p. 1). This is a major breakthrough. According to Aurosaprem, "It now only needs to go before the whole community [Residents Assembly] for endorsement." The need for this master plan is overdue as a large number of projects are proposed or underway already in the Residential Zone (see box).

The theory about cheap, standard housing falls down in practice. The construction process can easily go out of control and is prey to many possible problems. Aurosaprem notes: "Collective housing can cost more than single houses. People expect it to be cheaper, but they do not consider the costs of common facilities, storerooms, larger land areas for access and landscaping. And when on top you attempt to create some harmony in the design, something progressive... This is not always achieved, but in Auroville we have to try... Anyone can build a cube house with a channel roof for Rs. 1000 sq.m but in Vikas the cost is Rs. 4600 sq.m (carpet area) or 2800 to 3000 if you calculate plinth area."

Organization and supervision is the key to cost effectiveness. "In Vikas, we spent 50% more than we should have on carpentry. We lost on painting as it always had to be redone because of being messed up by workers doing other or later jobs. Finishing costs are where a lot is lost."

When the work on Vikas stopped due to lack of funds in October 1993, this made the community question itself. They noted their solution in their project report: "Our answer was that the outer growth had anticipated our inner growth: the progress of the construction site was one of the fastest in Auroville, but the progress within ourselves was not so obvious, and we had not succeeded in creating a very harmonious collective life. So, since then, we have put the emphasis on creating this harmony through understanding, sharing our individual experiences, reading Mother and Sri Aurobindo together ('Satsang', once a week), working together in the gardens ('Shramdan', once a week) and participating in all the small tasks required for the maintenance of the place."

Work on construction and infrastructure is slowly starting again with the eleven present residents. "Progress" continues...

Bill

Dust and Dreams:

Poems from Auroville? Aurovilian poetry? The terms are all elusive. Do they refer to poetry written in Auroville or to poetry published in Auroville? Do they limit themselves to poetry written by Aurovilians or do they include the work of all those who have been inspired by Auroville? Where does one draw one's boundaries?

Perhaps two anthologies of poetry from Auroville, *Dust and Dreams* and *Poems from Auroville*, express it all. Together they form a representative sampling of the aspirations and hopes that move this international community. *Poems from Auroville* is the earliest collection of poetry by Aurovilians. It was put together by Shyamsunder, Christl and Shraddhavan and published by Auropublications (now out of business) in 1977. It features poets such as Seyril, Richard Eggenberger (Narad), Gordon and Rod who no longer reside in Auroville but are still connected to it. *Dust and Dreams* followed in 1985, under the aegis of the Sri Aurobindo International Institute of Educational Research. It is a collection of poems in the native tongues of the authors and thus includes poems in French by Raymond, Monique, Pascal, Silvain and Michel, in Spanish by Anandi, in German by Himesh, in Tamil by Meenakshi and in English by Vijay, Roger, Arya and Martha.

There have been other collections: *Seeds of Flame* (1983), an anthology of writings, in prose and verse, of some Auroville poets about Auroville; and *Basically Blissful* (1992), a journal of prose, poetry and art work by Aurovilians. But a comprehensive anthology of Aurovilian poetry is singularly lacking. The lack is perhaps somewhat compensated by the publication of books by individuals, notably L. Kenneth Fator's *Selected Poems and Trek* (1993), Anuradha M. Legrand's *Mobile Hour* (1993), and Raymond Thépot's *Houle de Terre* (1993). Such individual collections are produced locally, often with the help of donations from the community.

In recent years, Shanta Books, the keel-roofed publishing house in Auroville, has been active in promoting the work of Aurovilian poets. Among other kinds of publications, Shanta Books regularly brings out slim paperback volumes of poetry by Aurovilians. These include: *I can't write poems* (1989) by Forrest; *My Mother is the Wind* (1989) and *Black Pines, White Waves (Poems of Japan)* (1992) by Marti Mueller; *Cantos con Presencia* (1993) by Anandi and *But for the breeze* (1994) by Lloyd Hofman. These books produced in tones of just black and white are simple but elegant in their presentation. Shanta Books hopes to broaden its scope and to link up with international publishing houses for better distribution in India and abroad.

Besides the above local productions, there are poets such as Auroluigi (*Sun-Fire Kisses*, Amity House: 1988), Kevan Myers (*Salvage from the Ark*, Banyan Books: 1978), and Gordon Korstange (*The Road Behind Whitens in the Sun*, Writers Workshop: 1984) who have drawn their inspiration from Auroville, but for one reason or the other published elsewhere.

So much for the what and why. How does one characterize the work of Aurovilian poets? How does one classify the note of a bird's song or pin down the colours of rainbow on the page?

I gingerly leaf through *Dust and Dreams* and *Poems of Auroville*. The copies that I have are old. The jackets creased and dog-eared. I am told that the books are out of print now and these number among the few remaining copies in the community. They are definitely the only copies in the Auroville library, in the special steel cupboard that Lloyd, a librarian and a poet, has recently set aside for storing the work of Aurovilians. And yet the poems that these old and well-used books breathe out have not lost the freshness of their inspiration.

Perhaps what strikes me most about Aurovilian poets is the sincerity of their aspiration. All poets are dreamers. But these are poets who have travelled, some for thousands of miles, to live out their dreams here, under a burning sun in the red dust of Auroville:

A FIRE

...
"We all need to be guided. As for me, I left
a land with the last whistle of a train,
And how could I ever come back to it?
I am in search of another land, with the premoni-
tion that a child will be there, making light of
everything, making fun of the sky, barefoot, eyes
the colour of sand, hands of fire.

"All those who look for a land, all those who can-
not come back...

Come back where?

What is left?

A few grotesque illusions: ruins.

We need another earth. This could mean having
to walk, this could mean a certain disarray, a
tearing away.

But if you stop, it's death!

You are not allowed to turn around, not allowed-
to go back. It's a long and dangerous journey,

...

Pavitra (transl. from the French)

The image of a journey is a motif that recurs in many Aurovilian poems. For the journey that these poets have embarked upon is not so much of a physical journey but an inner spiritual quest. The journey does not end in Auroville. It begins there. And though the goal, that of the Supreme Reality, is the one and the same, the paths that lead to it are many. Some poets invoke Indian Gods and Goddesses for their blessings while others reveal an affinity for Christianity or for Buddhism:

INVOCATION

Every year
the subterfuge wind parches the earth dry.
Every year
Goddesses fly low over lands and lives.
Durga alight!
descend into the slow edge of the night—
and with your tread, awake
our souls to mutiny...

Anuradha (from: *Basically Blissful*)

ZEN PUPIL

When one's soul is
a plank of
rough wood
waiting to be carved
into endless
forest.

Marti

(*Black Pines, White Waves*)

**"The Word has power—even
the ordinary written word has
a power. If it is an inspired
word it has still more power.
... In all ages spiritual seekers
have expressed their aspira-
tions or their experiences in
poetry or inspired language
and it has helped them and
others."**

(Sri Aurobindo on "The Spiritual Value
of Poetry")

Then of course, Auroville not only attracts poets and soul-seekers, it inspires them. The high spiritual ideals of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother upon which Auroville is founded and, indeed, the actual physical reality of this place have constantly inspired Aurovilian poets in their musings:

AUROVILLE SEQUENCE: 1

This is our home;
Born not of earth, though part of earth,
But the Sky.
Of ethereal wind-swept whisperings,
And a race that borders night;
Of thoughts and hopes and a strange gentle joy,
Vaguely caught, like twilight dancing on the leaves,
of another forgotten day,
(Though recalled, where memory is Joy,
And foreknowledge of Love to come.)

And a sense that we are One.
That when we strive to hold, we break;
Falling upon the barren canyon rocks.
And then, releasing All, we are One again;
And laughter lights our eyes;
And joy does fill our breasts;
As if by an unseen hand caressed,
As if by some great presence blessed.

Roger (*Seeds of Flame*)

MATRIMANDIR: ROSE AND CEMENT

Grey perfume stains our hands.
A strong sweetness:
the future grows;
and in a dovetailing of suns
a ray is caught.

Eternity,
seed of fragrant steel.

Anandi (*Seeds of Flame*,
transl. from the Spanish)



Poems from Auroville

The range of languages in which these poems are written, the diversity of the traditions and cultures which shape them—French, Spanish, Italian, German, Tamil, British—is perhaps not unusual given the international mix of peoples in Auroville. What is unusual is the “Indianness” of some of the poems of the “Vellakaras” (as the Westerners are locally called). It would be hard, I imagine, for a poet to reside in India and not be enthralled by the richness of her colours and the madness of her moods, by the generosity of her spirit and the poverty of her being. But many of these are Indian not only in their subject matter but also in their thought and in the feeling that they evoke. Some reveal a deep understanding of Indian scriptures and the symbolism of Indian mythology.

I could go on thus, enumerating the traits of Aurovillian poetry; but I feel imprisoned by the narrow bounds of words and definitions. I leave it to the poets to speak for themselves through their poems (though here again I am checked by the limits of these columns and pages):

HOYSALA SCULPTURE

This timeless dancer
Decked only in jewels
Leans across eight centuries
To bless us with the rhythms of perfection.
Who now could carve
With such precise conviction
The *apsara*’s still loveliness?

The master-hand
That shaped this grace
Carves our lives too:
A jewel-garden full of fire
With facets dull and sparkling,
Rainbow-toned
To cast a richer sunlight through the years.

For Him we dance.

Shraddhavan

THE HERO AS EVERY MAN: VII (The Future of Light Speaks Out)

Ravana?
Ravana was dead long before the world began.

I am your hesitation, and I am your wound
I am a future more luminous and joyous
than you will ever be able to imagine
the deer has left but two tracks to follow
one leads me to me the other to doomsday
and your hesitation is like the wound.

Remember Sita’s Smile: healed by love and
vision,
remember the future which was always yours
the vast Unknown takes over
There never was a wound.

Vijay (Dust and Dreams)

THE INSTRUMENT

New, tin-tipped, unblown,
the bamboo reed,
punctured
between each knuckle-bone
is poked over the shoulder
like shooting with mirrors.

I wait
with all things ready,
aiming
between the eyes . . .

Sometimes new flutes
are hung in trees
for the wind to blow the tune.
It is the same tune.

It is the ritual music
of bashful lovers, never
played for war,
but often at festivals
and triumphs, and for
the celebration of mysteries.

When I am empty
like the flute
then it will come;
for long before the reed was cut
this song was sung.

Navoditte (Poems from Auroville)

HER ALMOST FLEDGLINGS

On a halcyon day I found the blue
one-inch egg, pale afloat on the lily
pond—not on a leaf, on the water still.
And I thought of the kingfisher gone so
many days past; I wondered at the egg:
no tree stood near except the mango,
its branches clear of the water or nest.
So I took the orphan for hatching;
—don’t laugh, it happened, astounding me too.

There is a bronze of Kali seated in my house,
of benevolent mien, the mudra allows
approach, annihilation deferred; behind bent leg
I cached within Her cosmic wrap the egg.
For half-a-month it lay lapped getting
ready to hatch for its second’s reprieve;
its minute of mystery to live cleaving
time; I found it dead, dank, half-out of its shell
and Kali brooding on Her almost fledglings.

L. Kenneth Fator

SONG FOR TAGORE’S INDIA

Here sing birds
from the always
open cage
of the twofold way

and the wind
through the always
open cage
knows the best of both

Quite likely
near an always
open cage
they will weave their songs
Lloyd (But for the breeze)

THERE SHALL BE

There shall be a diamond stair
the nest of a half-folded arm which waits for us
the amber level towards something else
towards the other life in this life
the bushes/shall make way

it is not possible otherwise
the intimate boreal cold shall recede
the central margin humiliated comes close
the places the beloved faces
shall cease calling to us separately
the never-ending cleft shall blossom
one intense dot shall hold everything

there shall be
golden and amorous eyelashes on all things
the ecstasied hazes of bygone mornings
shall be perpetuated and the world’s garden
shall be the garden of our gazing.
Raymond (transl. from the French)

I AM THE GOLDEN FLAME

I am the golden flame
Waiting for so long.
Where is the earthen lamp?
Where the purple wick,
Oh, where the milky oil?

I am the golden flame
Waiting for so long
In my burning red and
In my dreams awake.
I am the golden flame.

Meenakshi
(Dust and Dreams, transl. from the Tamil)

Selection and commentary by Bindu

Illustrations by Rajendran

An Unavoidable Imperative

"Auroville is meant to become a city for 50,000 inhabitants. At present, we are just over 1,000 people, but already now the need for collective housing is being felt. One of the main blocks to the development of Auroville is the non-availability of houses. Many people would like to come, but life is too tough without the possibility of an immediate place to stay. Collective housing is the one imperative answer."

We are having an evening discussion in Samasti with Gilles and Suhasini. Gilles elaborates on the future of Auroville. "The present growth rate of our population is about 4-5% a year. At this rate we would have to build houses for 40-40 people a year. If we include the backlog of those Aurovilians who are now housed in very poor conditions, we can assume a figure of 60-70 people a year. That is our annual requirement. During the last two years houses for about 30-35 people have been created, so we are still very far from our target. As we have an insufficient number of architects and contractors, all energies should ideally be concentrated on collective housing. If architects and builders have the choice to spend a full year or longer on one or a few houses in accordance with individual tastes or to build twice the number of 'non-individualized' houses, the choice should be obvious."

"There are other reasons for collective housing as well," adds Suhasini. "There is the financial one. The costs of building and of infrastructure have increased tremendously over the past years, and it is no

Gilles and Suhasini have been instrumental in initiating community projects like the visitors centre, Prarthna and the future Solar Kitchen. Suhasini is an architect, Gilles an engineer. Carel asked them about their views on collective housing in Auroville.

longer feasible for individuals to come to live here the way the first settlers did: dig their own well, put in their own pump, create their own house and roads. It simply has become too costly. In 1988, the land prices for the Certitude-Samasti area was Rs. 8,000 an acre, today it is more than 75,000. In 1988 cement cost about Rs. 65 a bag, now Rs. 135. Prices of steel and electricity have soared as well, as have the labour costs.

Apart from the financial perspective, we also witness another type of person coming into Auroville: one who would like to come into a ready-made house or apartment, and give their energies to Auroville in another way than spending their first years building their own houses."

We are talking about 'collective housing'. Does that necessarily imply high-rise buildings and high-density living? "No", says Gilles, "what is being built at present is ground floor plus one or two floors, which is low-rise, not high-rise. The Development Group has decided not to argue about the necessity for high-rise buildings and to leave this question for our children. With our present growth rate there is no need for any high-rise buildings. Moreover, we also are obliged to build low-density buildings as there is so much space around. But if we continue a scattered development, we will

be obliged to go to the mega-structures in the future. Auroville will get filled in, and empty spaces will be used. But a city for only 50,000 people, as planned for our residential zone, is medium density compared to anywhere else in India."

"The big question at present is how to finance collective housing," says Suhasini. "The Auroville economy has created a very particular situation: Aurovilians have only a basic 'maintenance' as monthly income, from which they can purchase their food and sundry requirements. But the 'maintenance' is not intended to pay for the costs of housing, either by way of rent, mortgage or otherwise. Aurovilians do not own their houses, so they can't get a loan from the bank. This implies that either individuals bring in the money from elsewhere, and, technically speaking, donate it to Auroville with in return the right to live in the house so created, or get one 'free' from Auroville. There are many people now who come without money, how are they going to get a decent living space? Think about the people from India, Russia, North Africa or even our own children!" "We will have to create some kind of a banking system," says Gilles, "so that the money for a house can be advanced to those who have a monthly income by way of pension or otherwise from outside Auroville. But that

does not solve the problem for those who depend only on the Auroville maintenance."

Still, miracles do occur. As, for example, the project of Prayatna. Gilles: "That is a gift of Mother. The Secretary of the Ministry of Urban Development passed by one day and invited Auroville to apply for a grant under their so-called 'experimental housing scheme'. As we understood it could only be a grant for a very low cost housing project we were not too keen and did not follow it up."

But just before the end of last financial year, HUDCO (the Housing and Urban Development Corporation, a Government undertaking) asked us for our project. At the same time it became obvious that certain costs such as infrastructure would not be covered by their grant, and that a matching grant would be required. Out of the blue an Aurovillian donated Rs 400,000 (US \$ 13,000) and we received Rs 600,000 (US \$ 19,500) as grant from HUDCO. It will enable us to build 12 'free' units, 10 of which will be donated to the present inhabitants of the Matrimandir Camp, as the Camp will have to be vacated to make place for part of the Matrimandir gardens, and 2 to the Auroville Building Center to lodge its trainees. So each unit will cost less than Rs 100,000 (US \$ 3,200), including the infrastructure."

But this is exceptional. The financing of collective houses is a headache. Take the example of one of Auroville's first apartment buildings, previously referred to as 'Samasti II', now called 'Prarthna'. Suhasini: "This building was started with a loan of Rs 1,000,000 (US \$ 32,500) from the Auroville Fund, who was, exceptionally, able to finance it from their cash flow. The total building costs were about Rs 1,800,000 (US \$ 58,000), so in the middle

continued on next page

My flat smells like a church on Sunday. This however has nothing to do with a recent religious conversion on my part. For the clouds of incense are necessary to drown out the smell of the open vented drain pipes located outside my kitchen window. "Super cloaca est elesia" as the Romans used to say. Having lived for a number of years by a canyon with great Indian horned owls for my nearest neighbours, under keet in Certitude for a few more, and then a year on the road living out of U.S. mail bags, a small flat in the city is like a dream come true. I moved in during a thunder storm in July. The neighbourhood dynamics of this post-pioneering situation are not without interest. Gone the semi-communal pretence of green belt communities of yore, people mind their own business, and over the months we've been evolving a few unwritten codes.

I live in "Prayer" (Prarthna in Sanskrit) and my Russian neighbour across the landing is a Sanskrit scholar. He has a sister who just arrived from the Ukraine. The high-heeled shoes are hers. She has a wonderful voice and on Sundays when they have their revivals—judging by the number of chappals on the landing—it sounds like an Orthodox choir has moved in. To each their own, I say, but its only when they start singing "My Bonny lies over the Ocean" with Russian accents to the accompaniment of harmonicas and guitars, that I'm forced to open my taps and go downstairs and turn on the pump to drown out the noise. Anyway I'm planning a special weekend reunion of the remaining members of the Bottom of the Basket Basement Blues Band sometime next month.

Weekdays, it's been a steady troupe of workers and the constant whine of power drills and incessant hammering from the flat next door. This has been going on for months now along with a staple of American movies. My neighbour has also hit on a way of keeping his cute little daughter quiet. This involves a steady and oft repeated fare of "Chitty Chitty Bang Bang", "Mary Poppins" and the "Sound Of Music". And when the amma is not having a raging fight with my neighbour's mother in the apartment below I get worried. This goes on about twice a day and I'm seriously considering buying a radio. Occasionally on weekends there's a social gathering and it's Hindi chit-chat that comes up through the floor. And it was just a few days back that my neighbour downstairs whom I've known for years came up to me as I was leaving one morning and remarked, "I've

City Life



nothing against yoga, Roger, but your terrace is right above my bedroom and your pacing kept me up till midnight." I guess it's back to arm-chair astral travelling and the yoga of equanimity from now on. Welcome to the city!

I tend to keep Spanish hours and a few weeks after moving in, one night around ten I was at a friend's place two flats over having coffee and holding forth about something or the other when suddenly the stillness of the Summer night was sundered by a yell that made me spill the contents of my glass. "We're fed up with your late night discussions! Go and have your coffee somewhere else!"

As all the lights came on in the building and were probably coming on for all I knew in Samasti as well, I muttered *sotto voce* that maybe we should go and continue our discussion over at my place. And this has been our *modus operandi* ever since.

But finally what brought us all together was a little Summer war. One day out of the blue, weeks after having

moved in, we all received little notices informing us of regrettable cost overruns that we were requested in no uncertain terms to pay as soon as possible. Given the size of these cost overruns the residents of 4 out of the 6 apartments thought this rather unreasonable and felt that the matter required a little discussion—a feeling that the builders unfortunately didn't share. So we had a little stand-off that with the help of a typically rumour-ridden Summer soon became a deadlock of epic proportions. Finally under the auspices of the Working Committee a series of meetings were organised between the residents and the constructors. It was only a rumour that the Auroville guard was on call for the first one but it is true that an eminent facilitator was brought in for the proceedings. The discussions that carried on over the weeks touched on all sorts of topics such as the quality of finishings, or the lack thereof; standards of measurements (Auroville architects do not share a common standard of calculation for their estimates. Some base their figures on carpet space, some include portions of stairwells and overhangs, some discount 25% on open verandas, others include half or the full width of the walls: the great floor versus plinth controversy. The tenant would have to be high ranking mason to make head or tail of it all, and it is beyond me how Aurovilians who have not spent enough time in Tibetan monasteries can actually be expected to live in their walls. Other topics included what constitutes a reasonable versus an excessive cost overrun, the impossibility of making accurate estimates, on site supervision or the lack of it, and the problems of construction in Auroville in general where it is quite clear that Murphy's law—"If something can go wrong it will"—prevails. After some gestalt-dynamics, near meltdowns, weeping breakdowns and a pioneering show-down or two, we all got to know each other a bit better, tensions defused, the community became less interested in the matter and a compromise of sorts was finally reached.

But that's all one now and I think my neighbour thinks I'm crazy. As he was leaving his flat the other night I threw open my door and frantically yelled "TURN OFF THE LIGHTS!" And as he did, the silhouette of the candle-lit gap-toothed grin of my freshly carved pumpkin lit up the stairwell. I warned him it was Halloween, but I don't think he was listening as he rushed off into the night.

Roger

A WORKSHOP FOR BUSINESS EXECUTIVES

On October 17 and 18 the Tanstia-FNF workshop for commercial unit executives took place in the lecture room of the Centre for Scientific Research. The workshop was organized by the TANSTIA-FNF Service Centre, a collaborative venture between the Tamil Nadu Small and Tiny Industries Association (TANSTIA) and the German Friedrich Naumann Foundation (FNF) whose aim it is to provide supporting services to small scale industries. Representatives of the Centre had visited a number of Auroville's commercial units in April this year. They observed that the purpose of the Auroville units was unlike what they normally encountered: the usual motivation to start a business for the personal benefit of the owner was absent. Also the general concern for the welfare of the employees was noticed. But at the same time they saw the limitations of many of Auroville's commercial units. Many executives had little or no knowledge of the laws applicable to their business, and had no idea that in many areas such as marketing, equipment purchase, infrastructure development, or in the case of women entrepreneurs, special financing schemes are available. There is even a financing scheme which could create a chain of Auroville shops all over India, and perhaps even abroad. The idea of a workshop was born.

The speakers came from various Indian organizations. The Industries Commissioner from the Department of Industries and Commerce of the Tamil Nadu Govern-

ment together with two of his General Managers gave a short introduction on the package of incentives and concessions the state government has made available for small-scale industries. Specialists from financial institutions gave presentations on the finance schemes and promotion activities available from their organizations. Senior accountants and lawyers spoke about financial management, marketing, various tax matters such as sales tax and central excise and briefly introduced a variety of laws which are important for those doing business in India, such as labour laws and various pollution acts. The two day session was concluded by a specialist in the field of import and export procedures.

Without exception, the presentations proved to be very interesting for the Auroville executives. But Auroville's special situation proved to be even more interesting for the lecturers. The way in which the Auroville Foundation has set up its commercial activities (the Foundation manages its business assets through management trusts that do not own these assets) is unique. But it prevents the management trusts to independently avail of the financial schemes and promotion activities, as they cannot provide for the usual collaterals. A number of possible solutions were discussed. It is now up to Auroville's commercial units to propose some kind of formula to the financing institutions.

Carel

PIANO RECITAL

During a short dry spell in between cyclones and heavy downpours in early November, it was a relief to hear a different kind of music after the frequent "frog-mating" concerts one has to listen to these monsoon days. Although the piano was slightly out of tune (are there any piano tuners planning to come to Auroville in the near future?), and many of the keys were stuck, Pushkar managed to enchant with Debussy's "Children's Corner", Schumann's "Scenes from Childhood", several Preludes and Nocturnes by Chopin, and Rachmaninov's "Melodie" and two Preludes. With the sound of Pushkar's encore of one of Rachmaninov's familiar

Preludes still singing in my ears, I cycle back in the dark, accompanied by that other familiar sound, of singing frogs.

AUROVILLE CALENDAR

The 1995 Auroville calendar, featuring a beautiful photograph by Ireno of Matrimandir at dawn, is now available. Proceeds will assist Auroville tree-planting programmes and village work. The calendar is available from Auroville Boutiques, Auroville International centres, or direct from the Auroville Greenwork Resource Centre. Price (including postage and packing): in India Rs. 50, abroad \$ 3.50. Bank drafts should be made out to AGRC.

□

BUDAPEST '94 TO HANNOVER 2000: A UNIVERSAL CITY?

In September 1994, two Aurovilians attended the meeting of the Club of Budapest. What? Well, they were invited. The Club of Budapest, like its famous parent the Club of Rome, is a recently created autonomous body beyond national or political interest. Unlike the Club of Rome, its members come from the fields of art, literature, the spiritual domain and other creative endeavours. As stated by its President, "The Club brings together its eminent members for activities that focus their insight and creativity on projects aimed at catalyzing a timely revolution of today's consciousness." The President of the Club is author and futurist Dr. Ervin Laszlo who is also a member of the International Advisory Council of Auroville. In his report on the September meeting, he identified the general theme of the Club's proposed activities, "the revolution of consciousness: the last and best hope of humankind." The project is called "Life in the 21st Century" and proposes a "Centre for Planetary Consciousness." Dr. Laszlo asked for the views of the Auroville Community about these

projects. The meeting called to discuss the proposals responded favourably and felt this could be an important bridge to the "outside," a "pinch on the bottom to wake us up" to global issues.

During the meeting in Budapest one of the Aurovilians who attended noted, "There was an unexpected receptivity to the ideals of Auroville, hard questions about the realities of Auroville, and a strong, positive atmosphere impossible to explain."

Two aspects of Auroville especially interested the Club of Budapest: the planned CIRHU (Centre of International Research in Human Unity) project, and the concept of Auroville as a model of a "Universal City". Both these ideas have been discussed for years in the community and have now been chosen as the focus for the Auroville Birthday Week in 1995 (Feb. 21-28). The proposal of Auroville as a model of the Universal City for EXPO '96 has been dropped with the cancellation of that EXPO, however it may rise again at EXPO 2000 in Hannover!



AFI SHING-WEI WIL-GO!

Why should young Yesalway be called into the mist-laden forest by the Bamboo Spirit? Why is she so keen that he meet No-a-won the tiger? And when they do meet, the tiger speaks to him of a strange thread that runs across the universe, binding us all yet letting us free, but which, for some reason, Yesalway does not trust. Yet...

Many turned up at the Sri Aurobindo Auditorium in Bharat Nivas in the last week of October for this dance-drama in Frenglish (part French, part English) to find out. The dialogue seemed not to have been understood by most (like the title which

means "afishing we will go") but it didn't matter as the play turned out to be delightful nonetheless. Three Chinese peasants (Kanchana, Javatman and Bernard D.), one fisherman (Paulo), one spirit (Veronique) and one tiger (Jean L.) worked out the metaphysics of the universe. Also dancing were Aryamani and Joy (author/choreographer).

I found it a little awkward and crowded to have the light and sound technicians, performance, and audience all together on the stage, but when the tiger roared it was good to be huddled together.

Bill

IMPERATIVE... (contd.)

of the construction we had to start 'selling' the apartments in order to continue. At that point we were forced to introduce several changes, as desired by the clients, and even to join two of the apartments into one. Towards the end we discovered that we had made a mistake in offering fixed prices. There was a cost overrun, and we got into a very tough time with our clients. A series of meetings with all parties involved finally led to a compromise on the issue."

Did the Prarthna experience provide lessons for the future? Suhasini: "Many. One of the main ones is that we have to find ways to satisfy all requirements, and it is not easy to do this when individual budgets differ so greatly. We were once thinking of approaching our clients with a promise: 'We

will do our best to create a house for you for this amount, and we will reimburse you all the money you paid if we do not realize it.' But we feel it won't work as people are too much in need of a house and will be too attached to 'their' structure.

"We are thinking now of building only up to the so-called 'dry-in' state: the building is furnished with water, plumbing and electricity, and the finishing is left to the future occupant. A more distant possibility would be to build only a shell, leaving the occupant to do what she or he wants. But both solutions are tricky, as many people have no experience with building or supervising a construction. Still, the 'finish-it-yourself' option seems to us to be the only way out."

□

TO SUBSCRIBE

The contribution for the next 12 issues of AUROVILLE TODAY in India is Rs. 150, for other countries Rs. 750, Can. \$ 30, French F. 150, DM 47, It. Lira 35,500, D. Gl. 52, US \$ 25, U.K. £ 14. This includes the postage by airmail. Please send your contribution (or your supporting contribution of double the amount) either to the Auroville International centre in your country (add 10% for admin. and bank charges) or directly to Auroville Today, CSR Office, Auroville 605101. Cheques should be made payable to Auroville Fund, specifying: 'Contribution for Auroville Today'. You will receive the issues directly from Auroville. Personal cheques are preferred to bank cheques. Please do not send postal money orders. Subscribers will receive a reminder when their subscription is about to expire.

Addresses of Auroville International centres:

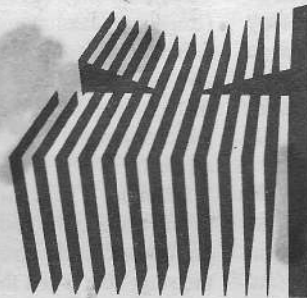
AVI Deutschland, c/o M. Soerensen, Bleicherstrasse 60, 28203 Bremen, Germany.
AVI España, c/o Arjun and Anand, Apartado de Correos 36, 31.610 Villava, Navarra, Spain
AVI France c/o Satyakam Karim, 14, rue du Colonel Grancey, 94500 Champigny Sur Marne, France.
AVI Italia, c/o Emanuele Scanziani, Via Mazzini 19, 24100 Bergamo, Italy.
AVI Nederland, c/o M. Berden, Lobellalaan 51, 2555 PC Den Haag, The Netherlands.
AVI Canada, c/o Denis Henley, 847 Chemin Perry, Aymer (Quebec), J9H 5C9 Canada.
AVI Sverige, c/o Ulf Carlberg, Borgholm, Broddebø, S-59700 Atvidaberg, Sweden.
AVI U.K., c/o M. Littlewood, Canigou, Cot Lane, Chidham, W. Sussex, PO18 8SP, U.K.
AVI USA, c/o Jack Alexander, P.O. Box 162489, Sacramento CA 95816, USA

AUROVILLE TODAY provides information about Auroville, an international township in South-India, on a monthly basis and is distributed to Aurovilians and friends of Auroville in India and abroad. It does not necessarily reflect the views of the community as a whole. Editorial team: Tineke, Roger, Jill, Carel, Bill, Annemarie, Alan. Proofreading: Barbara. Layout & DTP: Annemarie. Printed at Auroville Press.

AUROVILLE TODAY

By Airmail
Bookpost

C.S.R. Office,
Auroville 605101
Tamil Nadu, India



In this issue (8 pages):
The Collective Housing challenge: information, map and interviews; a
centre page featuring Aurovilian poetry; brief news and a backpage
portrait of an Aurovilian and her work.

Exp. # 74

ANNE AND MICHAEL
BRACE
AUROVILLE

December 1994
Number Seventy-One



PHOTO IRENO

Rossella at work. Right: two of her bas-reliefs.

PORTRAIT OF AN AUROVILIAN

Rossella

She bends over, chisel in hand, and with light, firm strokes of her hammer deftly embosses the copper piece she is working on. "This adds volume to the design", she explains, looking up and brushing away damp, brown curls from her forehead. She turns the piece over to let me look at the design. It is a partially complete engraving of Indra (the King of Gods in the

had once spent weeks working on a piece which depicted two lions facing each other and jointly offering an opal in their upraised paws, but when she was heating the sheet to work in the last finishing touches, the whole thing just melted before her eyes.

Almost all of Rossella's bas-relief work centers around Indian art—portraits of Buddha, tableaux of gods and goddesses, scenes from Indian mythology—and evoke in the viewer a certain tranquil or peaceful mood. Explaining her predilection for Indian art Rossella says, "I am fascinated by the flow of the lines, the softness of the curves in Indian figures... but I never consciously choose or decide upon the design, it is the design that chooses me. Often, a picture just leaps up from the pages of a book and I know I have to depict it. I dream of doing a portrait of Krishna in silver. And I think that will mark the end of my 'Indian phase'. Then I would like to move on to more abstract art."

Though Rossella came to Auroville in 1989, it was not until this year that she found the time and space to do bas-relief work. In the beginning, she lived with her companion Mario in a small keet hut and there was just no space to set up a workshop. Also, she was fully involved with teaching—another of her loves. She found it extremely difficult to take the decision to stop teaching so that she could devote time to practise and develop her craft. For, as she says, "Auroville is an experiment in collective living and I feel happy when I can directly work with the people of the community. I was working at the kindergarten before this, and I enjoyed being with the children. Now, it sometimes gets lonely, working on my own in this little workshop [a storage space in her house]." "But perhaps soon", she concludes hopefully, "if I find the funds, I will be able to set up a larger metal workshop in Kalabhoomi [the planned center for arts in the Cultural Zone] and provide the opportunity of working with metal to other Aurovilians."

Bindu

Hindu pantheon) astride a lion. And indeed, the calf muscle of Indra's left leg, the part that she was working on, now stands out in bas-relief, more voluminous and pronounced than the background.

Rossella is already choosing her next tool, a chisel with a fine edge. Then, carefully, she places the design, this time front-side up, on a wooden work frame containing semi-solid tar or mastic and presses it down. "The mastic provides support while I work on the front-side. One must be really careful so as not to leave any gap or air between the metal and the mastic, otherwise it will just dent the piece". So saying, she bends over once again, all concentration now, to define, even more finely, the curve of Indra's leg.

Metal has been Rossella's passion for over eight years now. She was introduced to metal-working in Italy where one of her friends, a metal craftsman by profession, had a workshop. And Rossella used to spend hours at the workshop, not working on metal, but just feeling it, melting it, trying to understand the essence of its nature. "At first touch", Rossella elaborates, "metal seems so hard and rigid, but when you work on it, when you put your love and energy into it, it responds so beautifully! I find it fascinating to just watch a piece of metal melt... to just note the point at which it melts and transforms its shape, its state from a hard, undefined and unyielding piece to a shining ball of liquid metal."

It was at this workshop that Rossella learned the basics of bas-relief, the craft which interests her most. Bas-relief is the art of imprinting a design on a piece of metal by a shift of its volume. This calls for a delicate and an intimate relationship with the metal for, in bas-relief, one neither predetermines the shape of the metal by using moulds (as in casting) nor eliminates matter (as in engraving). "Perhaps like anything else," says Rossella, "bas-relief is easy to do but difficult to do well. It requires patience and skill to be able to make the design come alive on the metal. But once one understands the nature of the metal and handles it properly, then the chisel moves smoothly on it like a pen on paper".

"It has also taught me", she adds wryly, "not to become attached to my work, to the finished product." She describes how she

