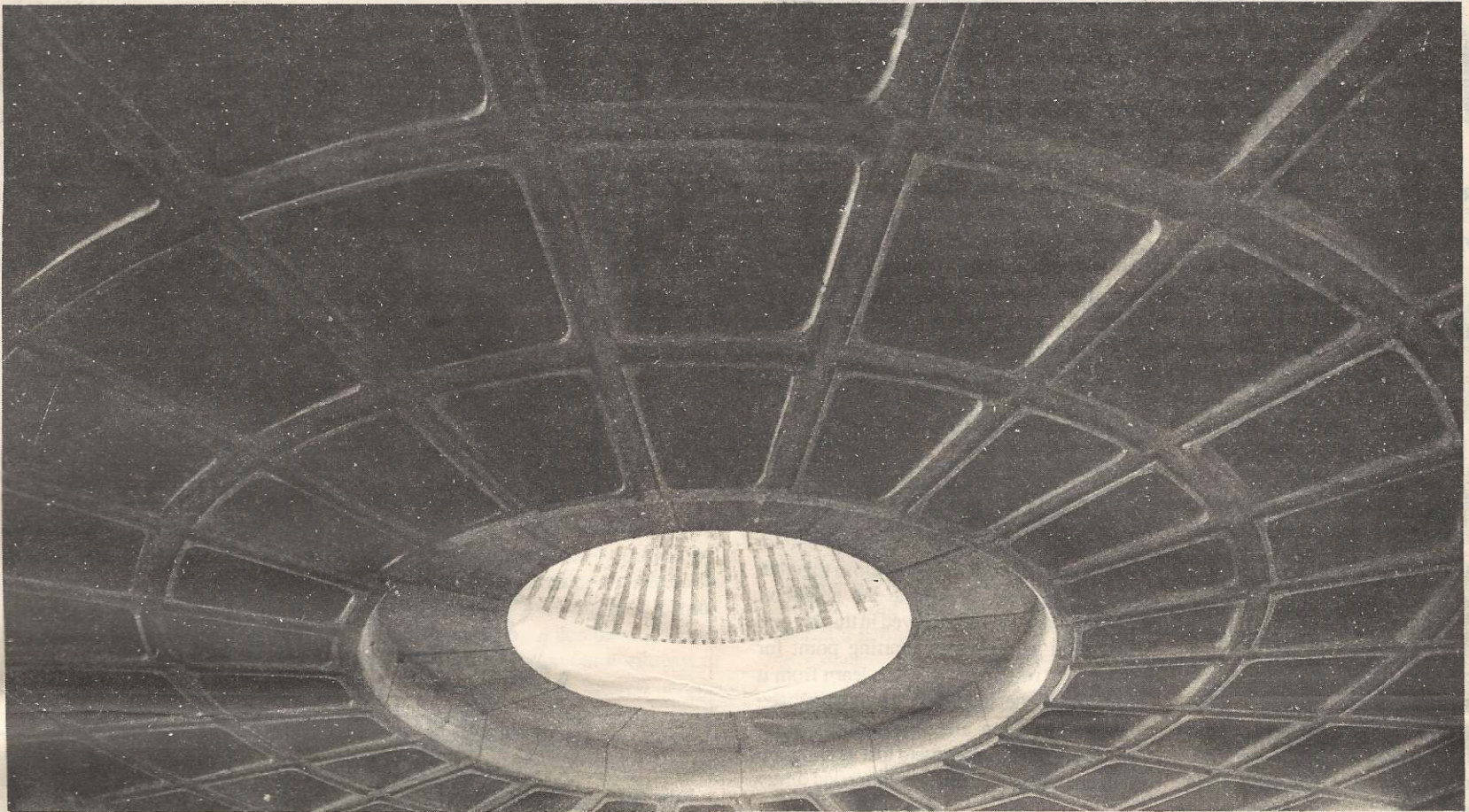


AUROVILLE TODAY

Number Thirty-five

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Roof of Bharat Nivas restaurant

Photo by John Mandeem

AUROVILLE ARCHITECTURE

'YOU CANNOT REMAIN CHARMED...'

"The first impression of Auroville's architecture is the multitude of highly individualized expressions and it is really charming to see that. Coming from more structured situations, this breath of freedom and creativity is refreshing; but as you know Auroville longer, and try to develop an overview, you realize that there really is no overview! Auroville has some beautiful structures, most of which, however, don't speak or relate to another. For architects this is a disaster, because while something may be beautiful in itself, its meaning comes from its context—from its being the right thing in the right place. When one sees this overall incoherence in the buildings, you cannot remain charmed... Then it seems clear that more architects are necessary, architects in the Indian sense of 'master-builders', those who have, above all other skills, 'the overview', working from the 'whole' to the 'part'. But in Auroville, architecture is not among the reputable professions, nor are architects much respected. The trend here is to self design what is to be built and to find straightaway the masons or contractors. There is a general feeling here that any layman is equipped to be architect."

AVT: What is the reason for this haphazard location of houses?

Anupama: I would say that the main reasons are the housing shortage in Auroville and also the lack of coordinated planning.

Individuals who come to live here are desperate to find a place to live. As houses are not available, many are forced to build a house. Anywhere else in the world people are not so particular about every detail in their house. Mostly what they find is 'ready-made', densely grouped and not built specifically for them. Here, having to build for oneself, and lacking any clear guidelines or agreeable predefined priorities, there is a bare field with no design criteria except their very own personal requirements. So all the dreams start to be accommodated in the reality. Even if they would have gladly accepted a pre built house elsewhere, now no

design is really satisfactory seen against the checklist of their dreams.

If someone decides to live here they must start the whole tedious procedure of first finding a site where they are accepted; then a design; then find the workers. Next, they must run around supervising the construction and, after working hours, purchasing materials. So much work involving all their energies for more than a whole year for just a simple basic house?! In this context their negative reaction is quite understandable when they are even expected to make the house aesthetic and, moreover, relating to the neighborhood and a town plan.

Lack of coordinated planning, however, does not only occur in houses designed and built by individuals. Many architect-

designed-houses are also predominantly 'individualized', and do not go any more beyond 'my fence' than self-designed houses. It has to be admitted that the contributions of architects to creating a clearer overview have not been too substantial either.

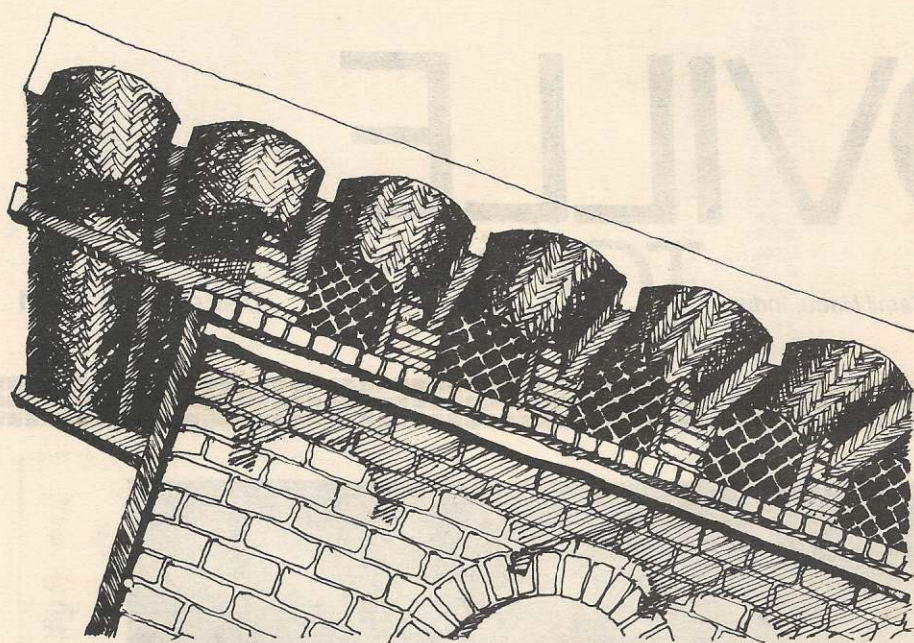
You said that there is not much respect in Auroville for architects. Are you not a little bit too negative?

Perhaps, because I do see that more people are engaging architects these days. But I would still say that again... So many people have built things themselves that you cannot escape the feeling that they think that they can build faster, simpler, cheaper and also better. At the most they would need a contractor, but why an architect when they know their own needs better?

Individuals have a tendency to cling to their personal needs. Eventually higher values get compromised for lower ones, due to their lack of concern for the larger whole. The real role of the architect is not understood; that there is more to an architect than designing shapes and forms. The sad thing is that Aurovilians still tend to think in terms of a 'Roger' house or a 'Poppo' house, but I believe that is missing the point. Now is not the time to give so much priority to Designer

continued on page 2

This is our second issue on architecture in Auroville. It starts with an interview with Anupama Kundoo, a young Indian architect from Bengal who joined Auroville a short while ago. Her views on architecture in Auroville, on building and on integrating architecture in a town planning concept are critical: "You cannot remain charmed..."



FERROCEMENT CHANNEL ROOF IN VÉRITÉ (drawing by Anupama)

continued from page 1

Jeans or Designer homes. I would like to see a lifestyle that reflects more that Auroville belongs to 'nobody in particular', that is more free from personal demands, and that people are able to live in houses designed for 'nobody in particular'.

Do you consider that Auroville architects have made important innovations in architecture?

Well, Auroville reflects through its architecture in general and its housing in particular its attitude of being open to the adventure of experimentation. And it can do that free from many conventions and habits, from building bylaws as in other cities, freedom from the many barriers and insecurities that dictate a design elsewhere.

A few individuals have indeed made significant contributions to the world of architecture in advancing a new technique, like Johnny's development of keel roof structures. Whatever may be the future of keel construction, he has made a permanent contribution. So has Ray with the firing of mud houses. On the level of modules and clusters, the Aspiration huts are commendable in the precise geometry of the roof surfaces, which are reflected in the floor space and in their groupings as well.

What would you consider to be the predominant building style of Auroville?

Mud as a building material is used here without inhibitions but you could say that the current 'Auroville-Style' to be seen in many houses is the prefabricated ferrocement channel. While this building material is ideal for reducing costs, there is also the experience that most people have not been able to use it aesthetically, and those unaesthetic buildings are now the common skyline of even the surrounding villages. But we must go a long way beyond ferrocement channels! In many respects, the standard in the world outside is much higher. Many skills are better developed and more organized and we must make the effort to go beyond our little bubble and keep up with the universal standards of refinement.

Back to the town plan. You spoke about an overall incoherence. Do you see that incoherence everywhere in Auroville?

Anupama: No, a few settlements in Auroville started as a total concept. For example Aspiration, or Auromodèle. But that was a long time ago. More recently a new

attempt was made in Samasti, a community situated at the borders of the planned city. The living patterns in Auroville had swung from an intense collectivity in the early years to the extremely individual trend of more recent years. Samasti was envisaged to change this trend, to respond to the needs of close living while fulfilling the more individual ones, and to illustrate the possibility of a greater urban density, repetitive but not monotonous, involving living close together while being able to tolerate the neighbor. Three architects were involved in this layout. They tried to develop a starting point for Auroville's residential zone, to learn from it and to take the next step in an organized manner. But soon after the initial cluster, even the Samasti experiment lost its common language and developed in unintended directions.

How do you see a town plan being realized?

One main work is to solve the housing shortage. We will have to ensure that there are enough houses, so that newcomers do not have to start building as soon as they arrive.

Then, of course, to cooperate together to develop a common architectural language towards the future. I have noticed that mistakes made by people in the past have become heavy issues and that often issues and personalities are not handled separately. We are still giving more priority to our fears than to our aspirations, and today people with excellent capacities are often not approachable.

We have a better chance when we become more professional, less upset by personal stories. Today, obstructions to the town plan mainly hinge upon the lack of a better way of communication among people holding different opinions. But I feel that we have built more than enough walls. Now we need to start building bridges.

Can you suggest a way?

A first step is to form an internal association of architects to discuss innovations and mistakes. Critical feedback is the fastest way to grow. I support the idea of Helmut to create a unit called AAA (Associated Architects of Auroville). To work together in a team where complementary skills are better organized becomes more and more imperative. The next steps will be to agree more or less on the order of our priorities and to formulate together some kind of building guidelines which will become necessary with time. Today, any building codes would

be unrealistic without agreement on common values and priorities.

Auroville is very interesting to architects the world over and there is always a flow of young professionals who want practical training or to develop technical skills. Many are specially interested in mud, ferrocement and new techniques. Somebody even suggested that eventually an architecture school could be started here, with the advantage of the special Auroville circumstances. The AAA could be an instrument to achieve this.

How can we realize the present town plan, which seems so futuristic to many Aurovillians?

When you compare the town plan to the present day reality, you see the big steps that will have to be taken. What is not so clear is how new patterns can be introduced with smooth transitions, so that they can work in co-existence with the older concept. The higher and more futuristic our ideals, the more important it becomes to design the tran-

sition, the practical steps to take us from here to there. When the phases and steps are not clearly designed, any vision that is judged to be impractical by our limited perception of today will be met with pessimism and cynicism. The ultimate goal must be reached through several smaller intermediate goals, which are more easily within our reach. The sooner we are able to do this, the sooner we can get moving!

The future probably lies in finding appropriate organizational patterns and building systems which have a common language and can be grouped together in several possibilities, a system that involves, more actively, its users in designing their own spaces.

The future of Auroville is embedded in freedom, which can help us to spread our wings. But it can also trap. The privilege of being free demands the highest consciousness. The value of this freedom must be understood if we want to retain it.

Interview by Bill and Carel



Building a House in Auroville

Life is not easy for those who come to live in Auroville. One reason for this is the lack of sufficient accommodation and, consequently, the need—sooner or later—to construct a house. Unlike many other parts of the world, however, in Auroville one cannot take up loans and mortgage the house to guarantee repayment. This is because the Auroville Charter does not recognize private ownership of immovable assets. And since the level of maintenance paid in Auroville only covers basic living costs, it's obvious that those who want to build here must either have worked for years to raise the money, or they must rely upon the generosity of family and friends. Often, the sum available is just enough, and this is another reason—apart from the ubiquitous spirit of adventure—why many houses in Auroville turn out to be examples of 'do-it-yourself'. For Auroville architects and contractors often require payment for their work, usually expressed as a percentage of total building costs.

But even if the money is available, it's far from plain sailing. There's the need, for example, to find a site—something that sounds easier than it is. Until now, building inside the planned city has been prohibited, so prospective builders must look elsewhere. Also construction requires water. As the drilling of a well is already a considerable investment, most people either decide to build up a new community together, or to join an existing one. The latter is often difficult, as Aurovillians tend to have a strong sense of territory, and often impose financial or other conditions upon those who want to build near them.

Even if all these hurdles are cleared, there begins the whole tedious business of designing and constructing the house—with or without the assistance of an architect or contractor. And while some undoubtedly enjoy the experience, many would have loved to have spent their energy differently for the minimum of one year that it takes them to construct their 'home, sweet home'.

Carel

GETTING OFF THE GROUND...

Richard Macphail is a Canadian scholar who visits Auroville occasionally with his daughter and is here now for a long stay. His first visit was in 1971 during a heavy rain. Even since he's been trying to get transport in Auroville 'off the ground'!

'The first time I saw a drying rack for utensils in an Indian kitchen I was impressed by its simple functionality. Once washed, things are kept up and out of the way where they belong, rather than cluttering the work spaces of the kitchen. The same principle applies to my vision of Auroville transport. Here's something I wrote shortly after my most recent visit in the spring of 1989:

"Does Auroville need a transportation system? Would Auroville like a safe, ecologically sound, time-efficient and virtually weather-proof system which could carry goods and people, with comfort, in any combination and with sufficient flexibility to allow both mass transit (for anticipated growth of the community) and 'private' vehicles? Would it help if this system operates with minimal reliance on government services, does not require that the right-of-way be owned as it allows for essentially uninterrupted use of the land over which it runs, uses widely available medium-technology as well as village crafts, and could incorporate high-tech computer controlled vehicles alongside conventional versions in the same system?"

'The format I have in mind is a light-duty hanging monorail bearing four-to-eight passenger vehicles or custom-configurations to meet special service needs such as goods delivery, maintenance and emergency. The carriages would clear the ground by an average of three to four meters and very little ground-level preparation would be required for fixed footings or more temporary supports compared with the wholesale leveling required for conventional surface roads. These vehicles could be operated individually or linked together into short trains for use by commuting Aurovilians or visitors on guided tours. They could run at speeds from 20 to 60 km per hour and switch from one track, or route, to another.

'I would like to see the vehicles powered from the rail itself by photovoltaics and a rectified AC supply, rather than from on-board batteries, which can make up 40% or so of the weight of conventional electric vehicles and will limit the "autonomy" of any

particular vehicle. This reduction in weight and the absence of heavy suspension wheels and tyres (no punctures!) would make lighter aircraft-type construction feasible. I would also like to see village crafts incorporated

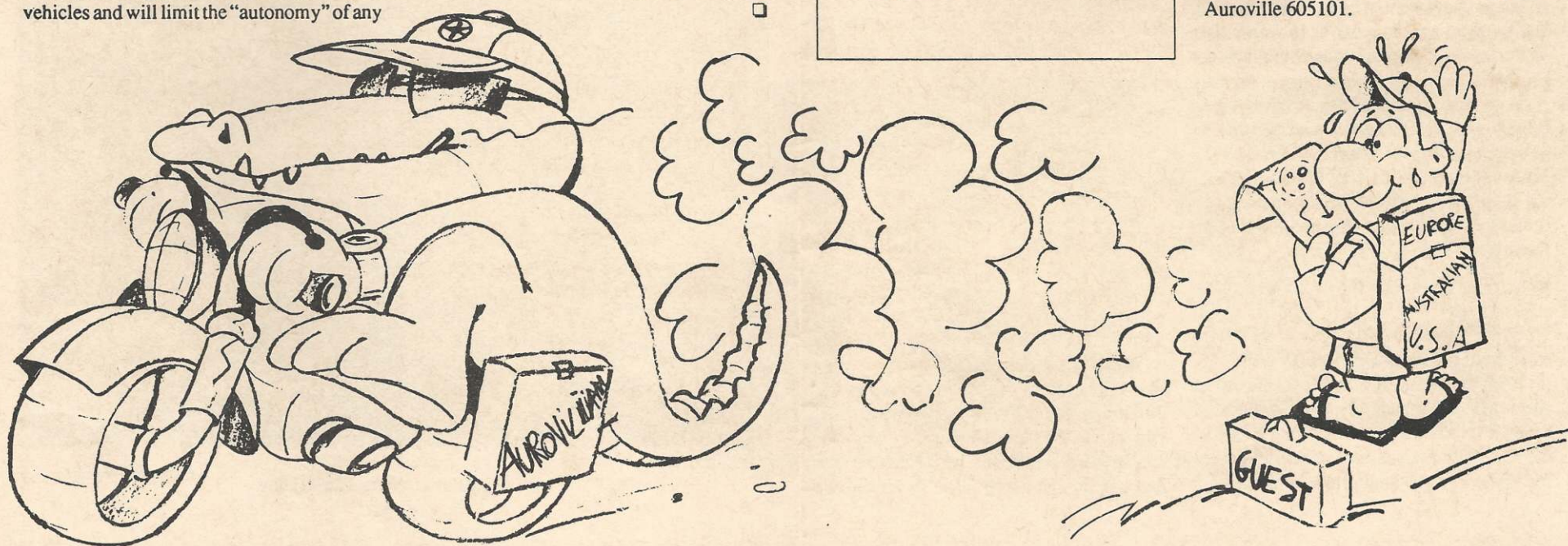
"The biggest problem with monorails today is how to design a safe and reliable track-switching mechanism, but I'm sure this can be worked out."

into the construction and finishing of the vehicles. This will give a harmonious blend of local texture and efficient technology. Such a system, fully developed, could serve the extended area of Auroville, not just the "City" area. In addition, a demonstration line from Pondy University on our north-east to Pondicherry could attract interest within India and from the world at large. It could provide Auroville with a long-term financial resource through the manufacture, lease and sale of systems, and consultancy services.

'The problems to be solved are yet to be seen, not to mention their technical solutions. The biggest problem with monorails today is how to design a safe and reliable track-switching mechanism, but I'm sure this can be worked out.

'The biggest aesthetic objection, I expect, is that a monorail is too 'spacey' and will disturb the visual environment in the same way that overhead electric and telephone wires do. To me, the advantages of keeping our means of physical movement up and out of the way, and automated, outweigh other considerations. Careful, concerned design can satisfy all but the most adamant of aesthetic critics.'

Richard Macphail



CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURE IN INDIA

The 2nd National Festival of Young Architects was held in Goa on 24th and 25th October 1991 on the theme: CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURE IN INDIA: QUO VADIS? Poonam, a young Indian architect living in Auroville, attended the festival.

About 200 architects and students of architecture came together from all parts of India to assess the present-day trends in architectural practices and to explore alternative directions for creating a better built environment. The two days were fully packed with open-house discussions, informal interactions, an exhibition on building materials, visual presentations and evening entertainment to bring about a festive spirit.

On the first day, Kolhapur based architect Shirish Beri emphasised the growing insensitivity towards the climate, site conditions and environmental imbalance in modern-day construction and techniques. According to him, this trend is a reflection of the present-day degradation of social and human values.

On the second day, Dr. Yatin Pandya, Deputy Director of the Vastu-Shilpa Foundation for Studies & Research in Environment Design, presented his research in housing the masses. He clearly explained that existing regulations and bye-laws restrict a harmonious, humane and creative development of buildings for the masses. Instead, people are reduced to mere statistics, numbers to be provided for, and buildings become stereotyped boxes to be mass produced. Open spaces become anonymous spaces between sterile, monotonous blocks. Equity and uniformity are misinterpreted as rigidity, repetitiveness and monotony.

Architecture is a reflection of the social, cultural and spiritual values prevailing in the society. Can architecture bring about and BE an expression of values higher than those existing in our present-day society? If so then HOW?

The emergence of an integral approach to architecture which includes social, environmental, cultural, aesthetic and economic parameters is needed. One of the options is to break away from adopted Western ways of designing and to replace them by traditional methods adapted to the present-day context: respect for the existing conditions of the building site, a strong link with nature, use of alternative, environment-friendly energies and locally available building materials — creating beauty in simplicity! And it is these qualities that could be seen represented in the work of the Goa-based architect, Gerard Da Cunha.

The King of a beautiful city asked his master architect, "How do you create such beautiful, harmonious buildings?" "Well," said the architect, "I design my buildings in four weeks. The first week I forget the money I will earn from the building. The second week I forget the fame I will earn from the building. The third week I let go of my ego. And the fourth week I go to the site, sit down and let the design flow through me".

Poonam

AS OTHERS SEE US...

The cartoons on these pages are by Emanuele Scanziani, an Italian cartoonist who visited Auroville recently. He left behind a few drawings, making some of the impressions he had as a visitor very obvious. They were subsequently used as cover designs for our internal news weekly, the Auroville News. Not everybody laughed...

Horizon 95

We had intended to publish in this issue an article on an exhibition mounted by the 'Aurofuture' team in February. It was called 'Horizon '95' and contained proposals not only for the next phase of construction in the town area, but also for the development of communities like Auromodele and Djaima. Unfortunately, we are not able to include it due to last-minute changes in the article by the Aurofuture team, causing it to miss our deadline. Anybody wishing to get more information about 'Horizon '95' should write to Aurofuture, Bharat Nivas, Auroville 605101.

WHAT TO DO WITH BHARAT NIVAS?

Auroville is envisaged as becoming a city with a population of 50,000 people. The town plan model that emerged in 1967 took the form of a galaxy, divided into four zones, one of which was the International Zone, where different countries could build their national pavilions. In these pavilions each country could present the way its particular genius had contributed to the evolution of humanity through their culture, language, music, art and way of life in a kind of permanent, living exhibition. In this way, the pavilions were envisaged not only as a kind of permanent world exhibition, but also as a window on the soul of each nation. India was the first country to express its wish to build a national pavilion in the International Zone of Auroville, and an architectural competition was launched to invite qualified architects and students of architecture to participate in a two-stage competition, recognized by the Indian Institute of Architects, for designing the Indian Pavilion called Bharat Nivas.

The competition

The competition programme stated that "Bharat Nivas should be a symbolic representation of the Soul of India...to seek inspiration from India's spiritual past... then leap forward to find for India her place among the world cultures and to express its renewing dynamism. The concept should bring out the essential unity of India...in a rich diversity. Bharat Nivas should be a dynamic expression of the art of building and a renewal of Indian architecture."

Out of 130 applicants from all over India, 17 competitors finally submitted their projects in time; three projects were selected for the final stage of the competition. In early 1971, the design of Mr. Chakrapani, an architect from Madras, was selected by the jury as the winning entry. The Mother approved of the choice of the jury, and is reported to have said that this design was the simplest and the easiest to modify.

The construction

Soon afterwards the first phase of the work started, between 1971 and 1974, when the Madras based construction firm E.C.C. started work on the restaurant and the auditorium.

A second phase took place in 1974, when E.C.C. came back to cast the roof of the auditorium. During this phase, a group of Aurovilians with the help of paid labour started laying the foundations of four of the State Pavilions.

A third phase of the work began in 1978 under the direction of one of the executives of the Sri Aurobindo Society. During this phase, Mr. Chakrapani's design was disregarded, and constructions came up that had nothing to do with the original design. This phase ended in 1982, when the Administrator of Auroville issued an order to stop the construction of Bharat Nivas until further notice.

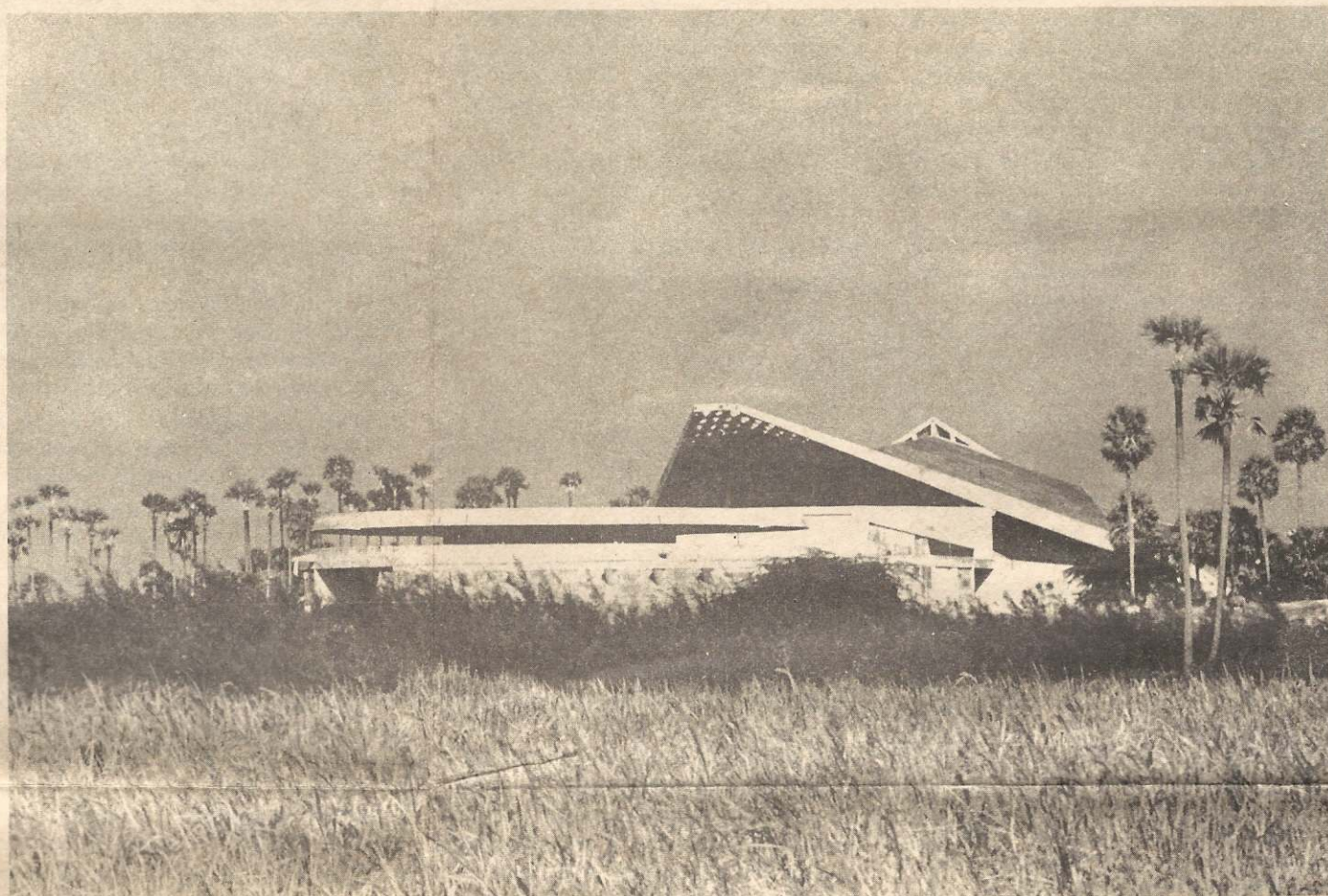
Six years ago, in preparation for an international youth seminar which took place in Auroville, the restaurant and the auditorium were made ready for use.

Since then, nothing has happened. For more than 15 years, the auditorium and the restaurant have continued to amaze visitors, and frequent are the remarks in Auroville's visitor book: "Why are these buildings not finished?"

At present, Auroville's Secretariat, Library and some other services are located in the four unfinished structures built by the Sri Aurobindo Society after 1978, demolishing or partially integrating the foundations that had been made for original State Pavilions.

What to do with Bharat Nivas?

Now, nearly 10 years later the buildings still remain almost as they were left by E.C.C. in 1974. In his speech to the Residents of Auroville on August 17, 1991, Dr. Karan Singh, Chairman of the Governing Board of the Auroville Foundation, stressed the need for finishing the auditorium and the res-



BHARAT NIVAS

Photo John Mandeem

taurant, at the same time mentioning that India, in its present financial crisis, could not be expected to make huge sums available to complete Bharat Nivas. Impressed by the auditorium, he proposed to rename it "The Sri Aurobindo auditorium".

Is the original concept of Mr. Chakrapani still feasible? It seems it is not, as not only are funds lacking, but its very concept seems to date from a time when "appropriateness" was not in vogue. Bharat Nivas' monumental concept is out of touch with the way in which Auroville has been developing, and so is the high standard of its planned finishing: the auditorium would have leather seats, panels of rosewood, and everywhere else teakwood was envisaged. The finishing would be in white marble with dark glass, and all the buildings were to be air-conditioned. The National Institute of Design had already been approached to do the interior decoration.

However, appropriateness in today's context also means to save buildings, and to correct the mistakes made in the original design and those added later by the Society.

For the auditorium, 'saving' means finishing the roof—it has cracks and leaks, and the structural steel is rusting—and preventing all kinds of animals, which use the building as a free nesting place, from entering. Restructuring means that a lot of work inside the auditorium has to be done: eliminating the dangerously narrow entrances, restructuring the seating arrangements, extending the stage, extending the back entrance to the stage so that the auditorium can be used for theater performances also, and making the entire place fit for air-con-

ditioning, as it most probably cannot be ventilated naturally.

The restaurant and its kitchen will also need structural modifications to make them useful. The circulation in the restaurant will have to be improved, and the kitchen completely reorganized.

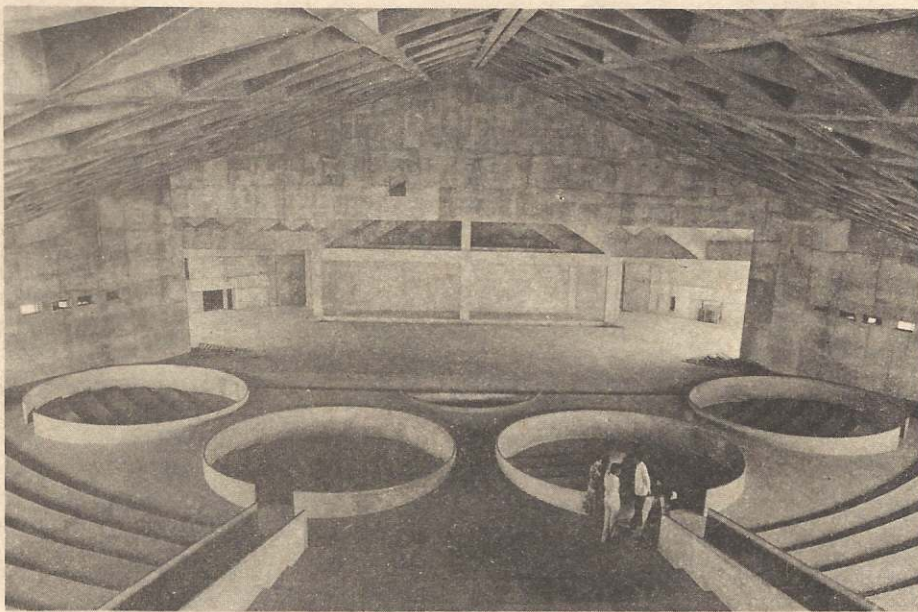
Where is the Pavilion of India?

But what about the Pavilion of India? The Pavilion of India proper consisted of the State Pavilions, of which only some foundations have been completed. Now one has to

be creative and see what to do with them. If one speaks about appropriateness, one has to see how to use them and what to do with the structures that presently house our administrative services.

Saving and restructuring the auditorium and restaurant of Bharat Nivas are first steps to be done immediately, so that they can serve the community and its many visitors. Re-thinking and finally re-creating the Pavilion of India are the next steps. It is to be hoped that in this new phase of Auroville's development, they won't take too long.

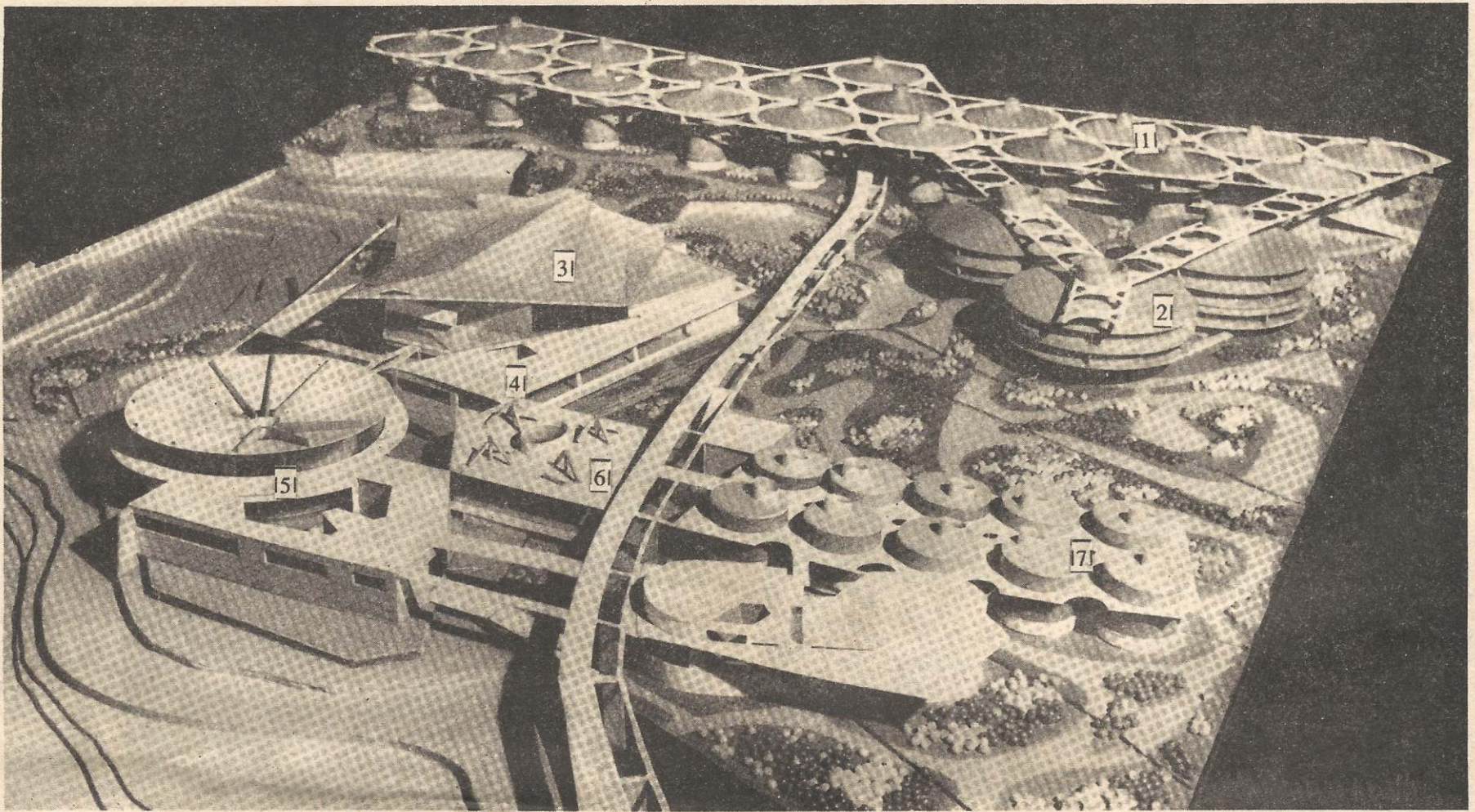
Carel



Inside Bharat Nivas Auditorium

Photo John Mandeem

The original concept



Original model of Bharat Nivas—India's Cultural Pavilion.

(1) 19 Pavilions of Indian States; (2) Lodgings; (3) Auditorium; (4) Plaza; (5) Restaurant; (6) Library; (7) School of Linguistics

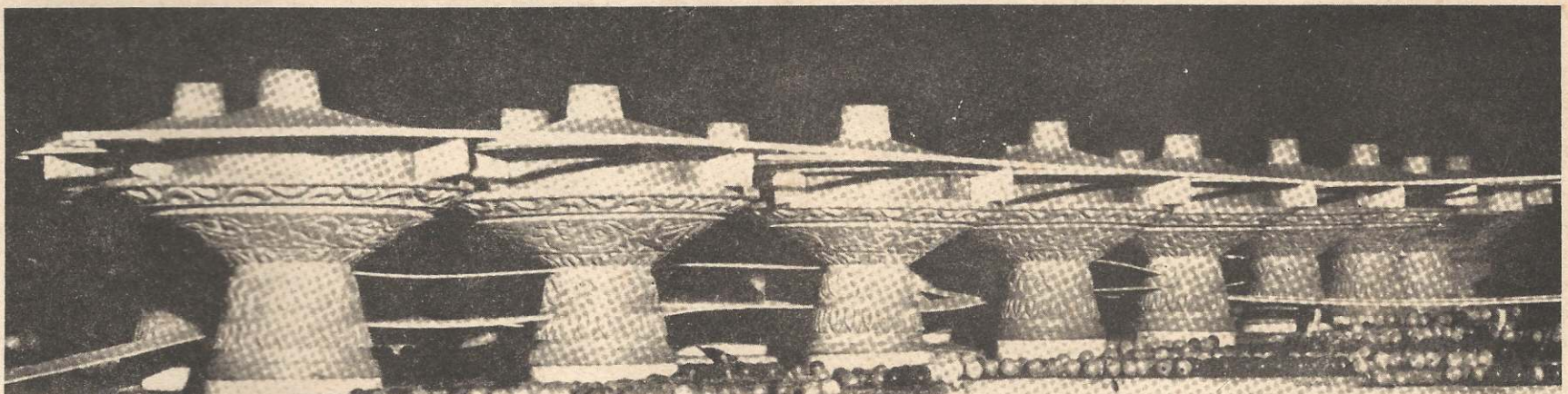
Chakrapani's design divided Bharat Nivas into two groups of elements. The first is a group of 19 pavilions of the various states of India, joined together, which use the common facility of an auditorium-cum-conference hall. All buildings belonging to this group are linked by means of a Plaza—an 'upper' level of communication, which becomes, owing to its special architecture, a place for meetings, exchange of ideas, i.e. an open-air extension of functions inside the buildings. When one enters Bharat Nivas from Auroville, one is linked directly to this upper level by means of a monumental access emanating from the main circular road of Auroville.

The second is a group of elements which support the main functions. It consists of a school of linguistics,

a library, a restaurant, and lodging for the permanent staff of Bharat Nivas. All these buildings are also integrated by means of a second level of communication: the 'ground' level, with its gardens, fountains and a paved area—to be utilized for informal meetings.

The State Pavilions were intended to show the vast panorama of the variety of Indian culture. Each state would express its originality in the manner best suited to its spirit by means of its own materials, ornamentation, colour patterns, interior treatment, decorations etc. The financing for this immense project was intended to be provided jointly by the Central and the various State Governments.

□



A close view of the original model of the Pavilions of the Indian States.

BUILDING BLOCKS

Steve came to Auroville four years ago with a background in electronics and with the idea of doing computer programming. But the community in which he landed needed help with their construction programme, and "I ended up getting more and more involved". Today, he and Wandana co-ordinate, as a family concern, an Auroville unit involved in architectural design and construction management.

AVT: What are the main challenges for you of doing construction in Auroville?

Steve: In my previous work, I was mostly a designer or dreamer. I'd initiate projects, but other people would finish them; but in this job, one has to see things through to the end. You could say that it is a constructive, grounding experience. Then there's the challenge of mastering the work, of being able to express myself fluently through the work. I'm now at a point where I've learned enough of the basics that the fluency is beginning to happen. I hope in two years to be a basically competent designer-engineer-builder.

Then there are the challenges that are more particular to Auroville. For example, the workers here come from the villages, and their sense of what is a normal house is one with mud floors and walls and a thatched roof. It's very difficult for them to understand or care about Western standards of building and finishing. Why, for example, we get so agitated over hand-prints on the new paint or a chipped sink. At the same time, I try to understand how they see things and adjust the process so it makes more sense for them, and so they can be more involved in the how and why. There is a synergy here, I have learned a lot from them.

Finally there is the challenge - and for me the most difficult one - of dealing with the Aurovilians. When there are difficulties with the villagers, I can make allowances; but when I encounter irrationality from people who have been exposed to a wider world view and who are supposedly here for some 'higher' purpose, it is more difficult.

For example?

A client says that they want a 'low-cost' house. I listen to what they say they want, I give them an estimate, and they agree. Then at the end they start adding things - a double wooden door with opening windows, cupboards, a walkway around the house, etc., etc. They repaint a major portion of the house two times to get just the proper shade of lavender; and then they complain bitterly about the cost even though the final cost was only five percent over the maximum estimate and I absorbed that. Or in another case, during the monsoon, a lorry of cement appears just as the clouds are beginning to look threatening. The lorry drives straight to the storeroom to unload instead of unloading 100 meters away as was the agreement. Sixteen thousand rupees are at risk, one branch of a two centimeter diameter is broken and the neighbour wants to close the job-site; and so it goes. However, in the past month or two,



STEVE

it has been better. Maybe I was just being tested in the beginning.

How is your relationship with Aurovillian architects?

Frankly, in general, it is not so great. To explain concisely why is difficult, for there are many factors. One for sure is my intolerance of processes that do not flow smoothly. Another is that my definition of 'architect' is someone who can design an attractive building that is also attractive to live or work in, that matches the client's budget, and who manages the process in an efficient and congenial manner. It is quite difficult to find someone to meet these specifications. So far my best experience has been with André Hababou, who really is a world class designer of the building's 'look'. This is my weakest point and hopefully something of him rubbed off on me.

It sounds as if construction is as much about psychology as about bricks and mortar!

Yes, and perhaps this is the most important aspect. I tend to be a rather rigid person

and this work forces me to loosen up a bit. I've had to learn to try to see the world through someone else's eyes, to get out of my head and heart and into theirs. This is an

important challenge, and perhaps the main reason I keep doing the work. It is the fascination of architecture that it brings together the practicalities of things like bricks and management with esoteric things like psychology and beauty and developing as a human being.

How much objective information about building materials etc. exists to help newcomers to the building process?

There is sufficient information; but there is also sufficient misinformation, and in microcosm it mimics the larger process of answering the question, "What is truth and how to find it?" Of course I feel that

I have this truth; but so do many people. I do not think there is much intentional deception. The issue is further complicated because besides 'objective' information like strength, durability, cost, etc. there are equally important factors such as 'look' and 'feel', and these seem to have as much to do with psychological or philosophical associations as they do with the innate qualities of the material. In any case they are more difficult to measure than the strength of a beam and yet are just as important in human habitation.

What about the larger planning process in Auroville?

Probably the first priority is to buy the land.

Then, more generally, I feel that any plan should incorporate three stages which address three distinctly different kinds of needs, infrastructures, and capabilities. These three stages are characterized by populations of approximately 500, 5,000 and 50,000 people. For example, a mass transit system is not feasible now as there is simply not the base to support the level of service required to

make it useful. With 50,000 people it should already be functioning.

Another example has to do with wells and water systems. Some people are saying that individual houses should not have their own water tanks and that we should stop drilling wells and make the equivalent of a municipal water system. With only 800 people? When we do not control the land in between major sections of communities? When it is nearly impossible to buy even a simple water tap that does not leak? With 5000 people there might be enough people interested in the water service so that the system could be built and maintained. Presently progress is being made in the proposed linking of the water systems in the Auromodel area. On the basis of that experience other linking can be made which, in the more distant future, could be interconnected.

Presently, a very important need is housing. In the pre-800 people, 'pioneering' stage, people just put individual houses here and there to simply be able to take care of scattered pieces of land. Now, as the population is beginning to grow and densify, the need is arising to live closer together and to shorten the building process and make it less expensive. An interesting development in this direction is the newcomer housing project in Djaima. Here several interconnected units are built to the same basic design. (We have invented the apartment!). While you sacrifice something of individuality, it makes better use of resources like time, energy, and money; not to mention that someone can simply come here and have a place to live. If we could do this more - and many of the architects are interested - we could really accelerate our construction process. What's needed is not only the money to begin such projects on a small scale, but also how to combine the best elements of capitalism's individual initiative with socialism's central planning plus...

Finally, overall I feel there should be a balance between the master plan prepared by a small group and an organic plan as developed by each individual or group who feels strongly about something as they build. The 'old-town' of a city is always much more interesting and desirable than the centrally planned surrounding city. In other words, the plan should allow for a significant amount of chaos in order to allow the unimaginable to emerge.

Based on an interview with Alan

Kotandan's story

Kotandan is 43 years old. He was born in a nearby village into a family of masons—but his father sent him to be educated in Madras so that he could get a "white-collar" job. When that didn't work out, Kotandan, too, became a mason. But that wasn't the end of the story, because Kotandan came into contact with Auroville...

"In February, 1968, I walked from my village to the Auroville inauguration ceremony. All these foreign people were around, but I didn't understand anything and didn't take it seriously. I was sure it wouldn't last. However, two years later a friend from the village asked me to come and work with him on the amphitheatre—and that was the beginning of my Auroville connection.



KOTANDAN

My next project was helping to build a house for Vikas, an English architect. I was the *maistrie* (supervisor) for Vikas and this was interesting, because it was the first time I had worked with an architect. He began to interest me in other aspects of construction apart from basic mason work. Next, after working briefly in the Nursery, I was recruited by E.C.C., a Madras-based construction company, to help construct the Bharat Nivas auditorium. I hadn't worked on such a big project before, and I didn't enjoy it. I felt I had no independence. I was like a slave, a small part of a huge production line. So when E.C.C. withdrew and the work stopped, I was happy to go back to working for Aurovilians like Janet and Divakar. The work was more interesting, and I felt more involved.

Around this time, I also helped concrete the roof of Matrimandir. Often, we would start at 3 o'clock in the afternoon, and work through until midnight. It was hard work, but we had a lot of fun. The Aurovilians were

Kotandan's story (contd.)

working with us, mixing and carrying cement, and they kept bringing tea and buns. It was the first time I really enjoyed working in Auroville.

If I had stayed in the village, I would have learned nothing. There the basic building method is fast and cheap. But in Auroville, each job taught me something new. For example, when working with Divakar, I taught myself to build with limestone and granite blocks. This is hard work because you have to chip each block smooth, but it's very satisfying because it looks beautiful when it's finished. It made me feel more like an artist than a mason. And when I was the *maistrie* for Poppo in Certitude, I learned to build brick vaults for the first time. Actually, it was the first time for Poppo, too. I remember when we finished the first one, Poppo asked, "Is it strong enough to walk on?" I knew it was. I told him that my father said, "Even an elephant can walk on that!" So Poppo went up and walked on top. Then he called me, then we called all the workers up. It was a very thrilling moment.

Later, I went to work for Johnny in 'Fertile', and that was a kind of turning point for me. Because while we constructed experimental vermiculite roofs, Johnny also taught me English and made me think about many new things. It was only then I began to understand something about Auroville. Before then, I had basically been just another worker, coming to Auroville to earn a living.

The next big turning-point came when I went to work in 'Vérité', because it was there that I met and worked with Steve. Soon he began to teach me civil engineering—how to calculate the load and size of beams etc. Every morning and evening, I would go to his house and he would instruct me. I suddenly felt much happier because he trusted me, he was a real friend and teacher, and now I was learning so much more about construction. All my life I had wanted to keep on learning new things, not just to keep in one line, and now it was happening.

And it continues now that I am working with Steve in 'Alegria', his construction unit. Because while I'm doing the accounts and supervising all the sites, I've also just begun making architectural drawings. Steve encouraged me. He got me a drawing table and materials and asked me to make the drawings for Mechtild's new house. It's something I'd like to do much more in the future.

While many of the villagers work on construction in Auroville, few of the Auroville construction techniques—with the exception of ferro-cement roof channels, shelves and doors—have been used in the village. It really needs people to go into the villages and get them interested in these things.

Although I've thought once or twice about working in Pondicherry, I like working in Auroville. Now I feel much more independent. The vast majority of Aurovilians are no problem to work with and some, like you and Steve and Tim, are real friends. And, always, there are so many interesting ideas around here.

Interview by Alan

LETTERS

GRATITUDE

Dear Auroville Today friends,
Thank you for issue no.33 of *Auroville Today*, with my first view of the Crystal in place (riveting—a moment beyond time; even now this sight makes me pause—opens inner vistas) and then Alan's piece on Re-entry. Shifting images, changing focus, in a seamless video collage of inner and outer, metaphor and activity, to bring a multi-dimensional picture, both individual and universal, of Auroville today... and a streak of crystal Light emanating from the Center.

There were tears in my eyes as I put the paper down, and gratitude for this gift. For me, this is '*Auroville Today*', it's true mission: giving a true touch of Auroville to those far away. Thanks to all of you.

In Her love and light,
Bill Moss, USA

VEGETABLES

Dear friends,
The distance from here to Auroville is very long, but every time I find a new issue of *Auroville Today* in my mailbox I feel much closer. Last week I felt very close. The reason was that we took up all the vegetables in our garden. It was the best harvest we ever had. I believe it was the Mother's force reaching all the way up here to the North. You see, we changed the shape of our garden. After much work and measuring, it looked very much like Mother's Symbol with a diameter of 10 metres. When all the seeds and flowers came up I climbed up on the roof of our house to see the result of our efforts. It was so beautiful, and now we also have the pleasure of this fantastic harvest.

Ulf
Auroville International Sweden.

NEWS IN A NUTSHELL

VAANAVIL—come and gone?

A new cultural magazine called 'Vaanaivil' (Tamil word for 'Rainbow') has produced its third and (for the time being) last issue from the stencil machine at the Secretariat.

A bi-weekly, the magazine offered more than just an overview of all cultural happenings in Auroville. Its French editor, Igor Wakhevitch, let his wordprocessor print out a jocular 'Frenglish' under various pseudonyms, and invited others to contribute art criticism, poems, stories, etc. Cultural programmes (this month mainly video-showings and recorded music evenings) will continue—and will be announced in the Auroville News as usual. For Igor, it's *reculer pour mieux sauter*.

STAND FOR THE CRYSTAL

The crystal in the Chamber is quietly waiting for its final stand, created with Sri Aurobindo's symbol. The gold plating was to be done in Bombay, but because of the poor quality of the brass base, John H. had to bring it back ungilded. It will take a little longer to resolve the problem. More about this in our next issue.

MATRIMANDIR GARDENS AND AMPHITHEATRE

The twelve gardens and the oval road planned around the Matrimandir have entered the execution phase. Work has begun on the rose garden, which is situated west of the Amphitheatre, near the Matrimandir Camp. On the drawing table, the design of the Garden of Wealth is almost completed and is on display.

The Amphitheatre is being covered with beautiful red Agra stones.

TREE-PLANTING CEREMONY

Malaysian casuarinas, Silver Oaks and pine trees reminiscent of mountains and forests were planted on the site of the future

Tibetan Pavilion at Bharat Nivas. Aurovilians and Tibetans from Pondicherry convened for this purpose on the 29th October, which happened to be the day after a big big rain...

AUROVILLE INTERNATIONAL NEWS.

It has finally been confirmed: next year's Auroville International meeting will be held in the U.K. For the precise date and place, keep in touch with Martin Littlewood of AVI. U.K. In 1993, the Auroville International centres will hopefully convene in Auroville.

Two new Centres have been established, one in Italy and one in Russia. For the addresses, please see our subscriptions box.

THE WEATHER

Those Aurovilian families who usually use solar cookers to boil their rice or bake cakes, have not had much to eat for the past weeks unless they were clever enough to use alternative (that is conventional) heat-sources. There have been many cloudy days. The summer monsoon showers which greened the pastures and washed the summer's dust off the trees gradually became the winter monsoon, which 'officially' set in on the 19th of October when the wind turned to the North-East. During the month of October, 45 cms of rain have been recorded.

On November 16th, a cyclone crossed the coast near Cuddalore, about 30 kms away. In the worst-hit districts of Tamil Nadu great damage was done to paddy crops due to flooding. In Auroville and Pondicherry, trees were uprooted, especially popular and ubiquitous Indian Cork Trees to the flowers of which the Mother gave the name 'Transformation'. The cyclone did not bring as much rain as expected. The total rainfall for November (up to the 20th) was around 15 cms, according to our unofficial but 'seasoned' weather man at Certitude.

INCOME + INCREASE = EXPENDITURE + EXTRA INCREASE

CENTRAL FUND DEVELOPMENTS

"My God", exclaimed one of the members of Auroville's Economy Task Group, "We lack Rs 35,000* this month!"

"But wait a minute", said another member, "You would have been glad one year ago to have the income you have now!"

It sounds like a scene from a household budget session. Is it a law of economics that an increase in income always coincides with an extra increase in expenditure? It seems to be the case. One year ago, we were happy with a monthly income of about Rs 100,000, and had a collective expenditure that matched this. Today we pride ourselves on an income of more than Rs. 300,000 a month, but notice that our expenditure still exceeds this amount.

The majority of the increase in income is due to the efforts of Auroville's commercial units. In the financial year 1990-1991 they contributed in total Rs 1,159,000; but in the first six months of this financial year they have already contributed Rs 1,068,000! Other main sources are the contributions from Auroville's guests (an amount of Rs 10 to Rs 20 a day depending on their accommodation), and the contributions from projects and individuals.

Expenditure, however, increases as well. The recent devaluation of the Indian Rupee by about 25% and the ongoing inflation make life increasingly costly. The teachers working in Auroville's schools, who are paid the lowest maintenance in Auroville, faced an impossible situation a few months ago. An immediate rise of their maintenance was provided through the Central Fund, but even that rise is only marginal. Soon, these maintenances will have to be increased to allow a minimal living standard.

The Central Fund is developing well, but has an uphill battle to balance needs with income. The commercial units have been asked again to scrape the bottom of their buckets to furnish a badly needed Rs 50,000/month. Be not surprised, however, if next year the figures have doubled, but with the equation unchanged.

Carel

* Present rate of exchange: 26 Rupees = 1 US Dollar.

Auroville Today provides information about Auroville 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.
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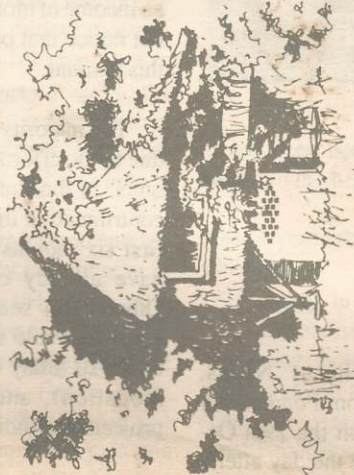
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ANKE AND MICHAEL
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AUROVILLE

December 1991 - Number Thirty-five

In this issue: Architecture, Bharat Nivas ...



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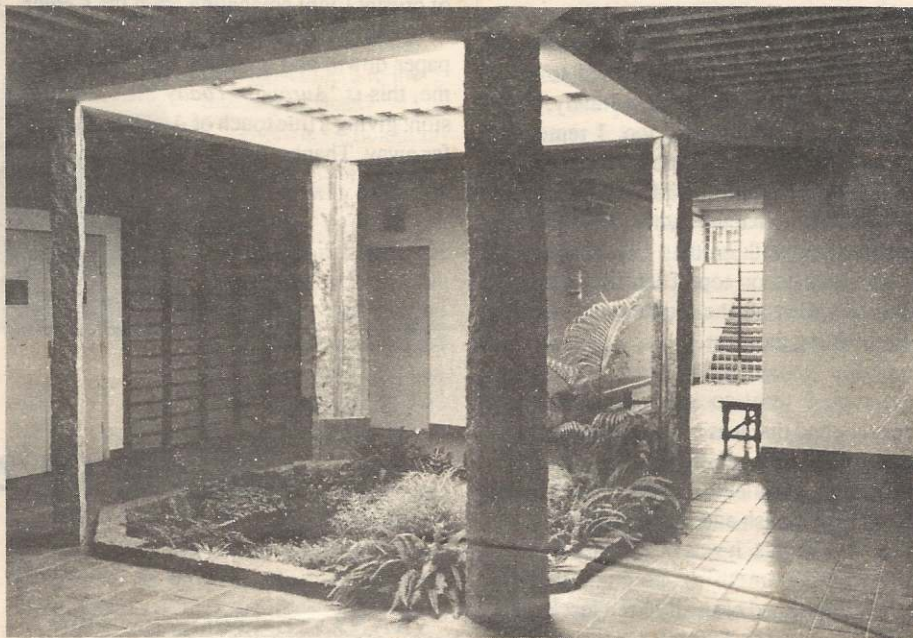
PITANGA REVERIE

The patio of Pitanga—one afternoon... I was waiting for my turn to get a massage. Some music of Mozart came floating out of the piano room while from the opposite direction, coming from the dancing room, Ravel's Bolero kept Paulo and the other dancers moving in trance.

It was no cacophony though, the sounds seemed to resolve harmoniously and gave me a sensation of unexpected riches. Sitting near the pond on the sculpted wooden bench, I watched the fish moving rhythmically in the transparency of water. The ferns and plants

was going to be my turn when they asked me to wait a few more minutes. Since the rain had stopped, I took the occasion to go up on the roof and admire the Matrimandir on one side, and the cluster of trees in Certitude on the other.

It was good to smell the rain, the wet soil, the freshly cut grass. Looking towards Samasti, I got an impression of the embryo of a village, a part of the city lost in greenness. A soft breeze on my face brought back the magic of the concerts on the roof with the moon as the sole illumination, something



Pitanga patio

Photo John Mandeon

formed a Lilliputian virgin forest surrounding the pond, which now became a mountain lake. The sun, which was illuminating it all and giving life to this small world, suddenly disappeared, and huge black clouds swollen with rain overshadowed this joyous and peaceful universe. Big raindrops troubled the surface of the water and the storm wrought havoc. At the same time about ten people engulfed the place with laughter and shouts, shivering like wet cats, then disappeared in the dressing room while Nollie was preparing her Hatha Yoga class. While looking around, I discovered on the walls an exhibition of paintings by two young Aurovilians. It was beautiful and refreshing, they were promising talents. In the video studio in front, Alain and Patricia were surely busy finalizing their latest production. From all directions energy was emanating. Some people came running in, late for their course, while others left after a massage, relaxed. It

miraculous. I walked along the walls and imagined the future garden that will soon surround this place and I told myself how lucky we were: the luck of having this building offered by an Aurovilian couple, friends of the arts, a beautiful and efficient work instrument, a sort of academy, *conservatoire* where all disciplines could blossom in peace, in concentration and joy. Different groups of dance, Hatha yoga, musicians, painters, singers, the audio-visual arts, massage, re-education, the evenings of Kalamitra, all found a refuge here in Pitanga.

They came to call me for my massage. I came down the stairs which were still wet. In the pond the fish had rediscovered their tranquillity, and the little lake its peace. In the centre of the patio the sun illuminated once again this enchanted world.

I walked into the massage room and abandoned myself to knowing hands.

Yanne

♦ ♦ ♦ To Receive Auroville Today ♦ ♦ ♦

The contribution for the next 12 issues of Auroville Today is for India Rs. 100, for abroad Rs. 550, Can.\$ 27, French F. 145, DM 45, It.Lira 31,500, D.Gl. 50, US \$ 22.50, U.K.£ 13.50. 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%) or 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 avoid postal orders. Subscribers will receive a reminder when their subscription is about to expire.

Addresses of Auroville International centres:

- AVI Deutschland, Bismarckstrasse 121, 4900 Herford, Germany.
- AVI España, Apartado de Correos 36, 31.610 Villava, Navarra, Spain.
- AVI France c/o Marie-Noëlle Philippot, 14, Rue Nungesser et Coli, 75016 Paris, France.
- AVI Italia, c/o Emanuele Scanziani, Via Mazzini 19, 24100 Bergamo, Italy.
- AVI Nederland, Lobelialaan 51, 2555 PC Den Haag, The Netherlands.
- AVI Quebec, c/o Francine Mineau, 10589 St. Denis, H3L 2J4 Montreal, Canada.
- AVI Sverige, 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, P.O.Box 162489, Sacramento CA 95816, USA.