

The challenges of planning the city

Sauro has been part of L'Avenir d'Auroville, Auroville's town planning group, since it was set up in 2007. Here he answers questions on a wide range of planning topics.

Auroville Today: One of the things that L'Avenir is most often criticized for is that its approach to town planning is top-down. In other words, that it doesn't involve the community enough in the planning process. How do you respond to this?

Sauro: I agree it is a problem. But the apparent top-down approach is partly the consequence of lack of human resources. At present, only four Aurovilians are trained town planners (only two of whom are working with us at present) and to plan the city normally requires the involvement of many professionals. But in L'Avenir three coordinators have resigned, and our fundraiser doesn't attend meetings. So we are looking for a minimum of three coordinators for town planning, communication and administration, plus support staff. Actually we should have ten coordinators, and each coordinator should have a team of at least 2-3 people. We don't have anything near this number of people.

Why don't you outsource Auroville town planning to professional planners?

This is already happening to a certain extent. However, we get reactions concerning why we don't employ more architects from Auroville instead. Roger was an architect but he also designed the town and this creates the impression that architecture and town planning in Auroville are the same thing with a strong emphasis on architecture. But they are very different disciplines and require completely different approaches, with different professional profiles of which there are a shortage in Auroville. Town planning is a multi-disciplinary activity that also involves the geo-physical realities, the socio-economic factors, the demography, the engineering aspects, the technological development, the legal context etc.

Why have the members who resigned not been replaced?

Our group has been appointed by a Selection Committee which is meant to appoint replacements when members drop out. However, when the resignations came, the members of the Selection Committee began resigning themselves. This happened a few months back. Since then, we have approached many people to take up the work, but nobody wants to do it.

Why?

Many don't have the time but, particularly for the town planning position, people don't put themselves forward because of a division of perspectives in the community.

How would you describe this division?

One division is between a defined urban design – the Galaxy etc. – and a strong demand to consider and integrate the geophysical elements. One of the exercises we are doing now is to try to integrate these two aspects: we have given specific assignments on surface water, land use and urban design to Gilles Boulicot, Suhasini and Luis Feducci. We are further expanding the technical team.

The other division relates to the kind of city we want to live in. We have two visions, one which says that there is a consolidated city to be built, and the other which is happy to continue living in a sprawling, decentralized environment.

If, at a very fundamental level, we don't have agreement upon the kind of city we want to live in, how can you do town planning?

It is very difficult.

Should we not as a community be looking at fundamental questions like this as a first step in any planning exercise?

I agree. Take the Industrial Zone. We have still not decided as a community what kind of industries we want to promote, and whether we want to continue employing people from outside. Whatever we decide will have profound implications for planning.

Who should decide this?



Surveying the new Transition radial road

If you look at its mandate, L'Avenir is the body to make these decisions. But personally I don't think this group can take such decisions in isolation. There has to be community involvement, and for this we need to know what the community thinks.

This is the idea behind a participatory planning process that we are proposing. We would like to get input from stakeholder groups representing nine different sectors of life in Auroville. These are collaborative economic growth and development; sustainable land development – socially and environmentally responsible; integrated planning and design system; collective mobility and non-motorized system; affordable co-created housing; sustainable infrastructure and service delivery; regional synergies; good governance and inclusive citizen involvement; and well-managed city – implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

Each group should identify a strategy for development in its sector and a project that can be a catalyst for the implementation of that strategy. Then these inputs will be translated into a draft zonal plan and, after community consultation on this, a five year development plan will be drawn up.

Will these stakeholder groups have to respect certain parameters?

There always needs to be some kind of framework. For me, the starting-point is the 'vision' document approved by the Residents Assembly in 2007. This is quite a well-balanced document because there are technical arguments about the need to integrate urban design with the geophysical reality, and it tries to create a balance between a long-term and short-term approach. It also gives flexibility because while it defines what Roger described as the non-negotiable elements of the Galaxy – 50,000 population, the four zones, the Crown, Lines of Force, Matrimandir and the lake etc. – it gives a lot of freedom to elaborate.

I don't think we have the option to say we are not developing into a city. We have come here to experiment but there is a limit to this

experiment. We cannot change the nature of the experiment itself, which is that it is intended to be a city, a city with a certain economy and a particular orientation on education, among other things.

So we should fix limits for participatory discussion. Among them should be the understanding that our present lifestyle is a transitional one, and that the present 2,000 inhabitants cannot look only at their needs but have also to consider the needs of the future population.

This touches upon two different visions of development. Some people feel we need to focus upon present needs and that long-term development should be left aside with a certain trust that it will evolve in the light of circumstances. Others feel it is important to get the larger vision down on the ground as soon as possible as that will create a certain energy field which will attract more people to this project. Isn't this one of the crucial questions that need to be resolved?

Yes, these are two very different visions of the development of Auroville. So there has to be flexibility: we need to find a balance between present needs and the ultimate vision. The most obvious example is the International Zone, where we have this idea of the national pavilions but it is the zone with the least development and the proposals we are receiving are sometimes very different from the approved plan.

In this zone, we have had the tendency in the last few years to approve all the projects that have been submitted, even if they didn't comply with the long-term urban design.

In the Cultural Zone we have also accepted projects which were not foreseen when the overall zone plan was studied by Roger. However, sectors one and two of the Residential Zones are at quite an advanced stage of planning, and when you get down to that level of detail you lose a certain degree of flexibility.

Another problem which creates distrust is that we miss the intermediate layer of planning.

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Sauro in his office in L'Avenir d'Auroville, also called the Town Development Council

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The challenges of planning the city

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We have a Master Plan which is very general – it doesn't even include most of the studies and parameters made by Roger – but, with a few exceptions, we don't have detailed development plans. So although the Master Plan has been approved, there is little information about what kind of developments may come up on a specific plot of land. That is why we are giving professional assignments for preparation of a detailed development plan that identify the plots to be built on with density and elevation, the infrastructure network, the green area and the areas not to be built on because of water preservation or other natural feature. We have started this exercise for sectors 1 and 2 of the Residential Zone and would like to undertake it all over the city area, although not necessarily at the same level of detail. It will be an important tool of communication and transparency because everybody can know what is envisaged for a particular portion of land and will know what to expect and where to look for a place for their projects. We have started this work with Luis Feducci and we want to start working with the participatory planning groups on this intermediate level. It is not easy: we are already on the sixth version of sectors one and two and I'm sure more versions will come. But basically the attempt is to bring transparency to the community about how planning decisions are taken.

You speak of the 'ultimate vision', which assumes that you know what the city will finally look like. But how can you plan for a city where it may take up to 40 years to reach its planned population level? Many things can change in that time. There will be advances in technology, in mobility, in the consciousness of its inhabitants. Today you are creating a planning template on the basis of the Galaxy. How do you know it will have the same validity in 25 years time?

We cannot know this, which is why we have to preserve space for future developments. We need to develop but keep the options for the future as open as possible.

You mention that Roger did planning work in the Cultural and International Zones. What kind of work did he do, and what is the status of this work? Is it a given, non-negotiable?

We have not yet come to this level of discussion. Both the Cultural and International Zones have been quite deeply studied by Roger. He laid down broad urban lines, but I think there is still a lot of scope for interpretation. Nevertheless, the fact he has done this work means that in these zones we are following a

negotiated process involving temporary arrangements or projects which answer to new needs not previously envisaged.

Nobody outside the planning group knows about Roger's work in these zones. Shouldn't this information be communicated to the wider community?

Well... the work on the International Zone is very well known, whereas it is true that there is less awareness of the work on the Cultural Zone. It should also be said that there are certain discrepancies between the Master Plan and the work of Roger. This is partly because the Master Plan was prepared to take into consideration certain government parameters; partly because it was kept very general to achieve the maximum consensus possible for land protection; and partly because Roger's ideas evolved after the Master Plan was accepted. This happened, for example, with the mobility parameters. This is another reason why people accuse us of following a top-down approach to planning, because in our planning process we refer not only to the Master Plan but also to Roger's work which was not included in that document. Now we are working on creating a brochure of Roger's work to make the information on the process more accessible.

Roger's later ideas concerning mobility are contained in a 2005 document. The main changes seem to relate to the radials. In the Master Plan there were only eight, in the 2005 plan there are twelve, and they are arranged to represent Mother's symbol. What is the status of this mobility plan today?

I cannot give a clear answer. It's true that when we try to make any kind of road we refer to this document, because it is the only mobility concept that we have at present. But it has been criticized for various reasons and, personally, I feel a new mobility document has to emerge.

One of the criticisms of the mobility plan is that it ignores ground realities. For example, one of the radials would pass through a local village, Bharatipuram.

I agree this is one of the main points of difference and discussion at present. I don't know what will be the outcome of the debate but the main point is to try and find a place for everything – for Roger's ideas, for issues which have been raised in the land use document by Suhasini and for things that may emerge from the participatory process.

In fact, we are already discussing certain updates to the Master Plan. For example, it has to be seen if the outer Ring Road needs to be everywhere a motorised distribution road. In my view, in certain sections it may retain only the main function to delimit the area of the city. It could even be a cycle path or a simple infrastructure corridor like, for example, on the perimeter of sectors one and two of the Residential Zone where it would pass through an established forest. Also, there seems to be consensus in the planning group that the Right of Way for the ring road should be reduced. In other words, with reference to the Master Plan, we have defined the Crown but the radials and the Ring Road are more open to interpretation.

This flexibility is not being communicated to the larger community. Shouldn't you work much harder on explaining this, as well as the rationale behind your planning process?

I totally agree. I don't have a solution about how to improve communication except to try to lay out all the information upon which we are basing the planning process. For example, people don't understand why we want a more concentrated development in sectors one and two of the Residential Zone. They ask why we want to cram them together when there is so much land around. But the idea is to create on a small scale a full-fledged model of how we could live in Auroville; we want to create an embryonic system of social life which we can experiment with and improve. If we don't do this now, if we postpone this until we have a population of 5,000 or 10,000 people, then it will be too late to make the experiment. This is the main reason for the densification. Mobility is also another important reason. If services and residences are clustered in development nodes the need for motorized transport get largely reduced.

What about the rationale behind your mobility planning? Some people ask why you are building a major road in the Kottakarai area when there are much more pressing mobility needs – for example, upgrading the much-used dust road between Certitude and the Solar Kitchen.

Our mobility priorities are, firstly, to provide access to planned clusters of development. Kottakarai is one of these areas and we are working there to provide new access for the Industrial Zone and the industrial area of Mangalam and Pony farm which we are trying to develop. The Cultural Zone is another, which is why we have recently completed the Transition radial.

Regarding the Certitude-Solar Kitchen road, we prefer not to develop this as it is not on

Auroville land and we cannot control its use. Instead, we are studying a new access road for Aurovilians to the city. This could be either the Reve radial or another road on fully Auroville land which would begin somewhere midway between Certitude corner and the telephone exchange.

Would this conform to the 2005 mobility plan?

Most of them do conform, some of them not. Definitely things can happen that won't fit into this mobility plan, although probably they would be looked upon as temporary developments for the next 10 – 15 years.

But who defines what is temporary and what is permanent, what can evolve and what can't? Is it L'Avenir? If so, what is the purpose of participatory planning? The suspicion is that L'Avenir is continuing with its own vision of planning irrespective of community concerns, and that any wider participatory exercise is simply cosmetic. You talk about the Master Plan being approved by the community, yet certain changes have been made since without community knowledge or approval. What is the status of these changes?

I understand what you are saying, but I'm not sure I can answer it. What I can say is that we are trying in our planning process to harmonise three different conflicting elements – the conceptual design; topography and geography; and the demands of the present society and the needs of the future inhabitants.

The other issue the community would like to know more about is your internal process in L'Avenir. Before this group came into existence in 2007, there was a conflict between the Development Group and Aurofuture: the Development Group wanted to incorporate ground realities, while Aurofuture felt that whatever did not conform to the ultimate plan should not happen. L'Avenir was set up to incorporate these different approaches to planning and, hopefully, to resolve them. How successful have you been in doing this?

Clearly, we still have different views within L'Avenir. For a long time we had members whose different approaches to planning, at least in public, were quite extreme. Within the group, though, there was a tendency to be flexible in order to find solutions. I have seen people who have a reputation of being very rigid in their approach sitting around the same table and, when confronted with the daily reality, taking up the responsibility to be constructive and cooperative.

From conversations with Alan

HOUSING DEVELOPMENT

About two years ago, the Housing Service proposed that outlying Auroville lands be sold, and the major part of the proceeds used for land purchase in the city and greenbelt areas and a lesser part to create housing for those without financial means.

"Nothing came from that proposal," says Joseba, one of the executives of the Housing Service. "At the time there were about 180 people without means needing a house or apartment. Today, there are at least a 100 people who are still without appropriate accommodation and who depend on the community to provide it." He shrugs. "There are people in Auroville who would like to welcome anybody to join Auroville, irrespective of their financial situation. But the reality is that Auroville is in no position to give free accommodation."

New housing projects

For those who have the means, new housing projects are coming up. The Swayam community is now fully occupied, with the last two buildings under construction. It houses around 50 people in 17 houses and apartments. The Invocation extension of 15 apartments is under construction with the first six flats due to be completed by

March 2015, and the next six by May 2016. Clients for the last three apartments are still being solicited. SacredGroves is under construction [see article on pages 4-5]. The Sanjana project which has clients for 12 of its 20 apartments and which will house approximately 60 people, is ready to take off, but differences of opinion with L'Avenir d'Auroville have resulted in delays, with the No Objection Certificate still being awaited. The Green Casbah project with a total

of 40 apartments, 16 in its first phase, has received building permission but still lacks clients. The Kalpana project, which aims at building 55 apartments that will house about 100 people, is awaiting site permission; and Maitreye III, now called Serenity – a project of 10-12 houses to be built in between Maitreye I and II – is still on the drawing board.

"All these are excellent developments," says Joseba. "But they will not provide much relief to those with-

out means. In some of these projects it is the intention to make one or two apartments available for free – but there is no guarantee that, when the construction is ready, this will be possible as often the costs of construction exceed the estimates, with the consequence that the potentially free apartment has to be 'sold' in order to cover the price increases."

Newcomer housing

Some relief for Newcomers can also be expected. The Maitreye II apartment building (27 apartments) will be ready by July or August this year. This apartment complex 'ground + three' has been built with a grant from the Government of India. Following the advice of the Secretary of the Auroville Foundation, Maitreye II will only house Newcomers for a limited period of time. "All they'll have to pay is their share in the maintenance costs," says Joseba. This will be a positive step as some Newcomers are now charged rents of up to Rs 25,000 a month for a house in the nearby villages and even for an apartment in Auroville. "We consider it



Houses in Swayam community

Update on



Invocation II, an apartment complex for occupation by

unacceptable that a private Aurovillian or an Auroville guesthouse charges that much from a Newcomer," says Joseba. "We would really welcome it if the FAMC would study the matter and come up with a ruling. We see this as an abuse of the Newcomer, which goes against Auroville's ideals."

During their stay in Maitreye II, the Newcomers are supposed to look for a permanent house or apartment. "They are expected to put money into

Developing the Sri Ma resort

In the early days, the Auroville community located on the beach north of Auroville was known as Far Beach, approachable through a narrow road which led from Pondicherry to Mahabalipuram. In later years, the road was widened and became a national highway, the East Coast Road. For years, Far Beach, re-baptised 'Sri Ma', housed a vibrant community of families and individuals. Over time, the Pondicherry Engineering College and Pondicherry University became its neighbours.

Today, the Sri Ma community has all but gone. With the passing of Albert some months ago, the number of residents has dwindled to four, with one of them wanting to move out. The other three are active in giving a new impetus to the place through developing it into a resort – not a common holiday resort for tourists, but a place for people to meet, learn and relax.

"The future of the Auroville economy," says Daniel, who is running the project together with his partner Sheril, "is hospitality connected to education. Auroville has lots to offer, from sustainability to spirituality, and an increasing number of people want to come and learn. Sri Ma is an ideal place. We have now converted two houses into guest accommodation with 13

accommodate: in November he had to refuse three groups of 60 people each.

But why, in a time when everybody speaks about 'the Auroville housing crisis', are houses converted into guestrooms?

"There are two answers," says Daniel. "One is that nobody wants to move here. One of the houses which I converted stood empty for almost two and a half years, with nobody willing to pay the requested contribution of Rs 12.5 lakhs! Cyclone Thane, which hit Auroville on 30 December 2011, smashed all the doors and windows, but nobody came forward to repair the house or even ask for repair money from the Cyclone Relief Fund. Finally, I paid for all the repairs and made the house liveable again. This showed that Sri Ma is no longer a

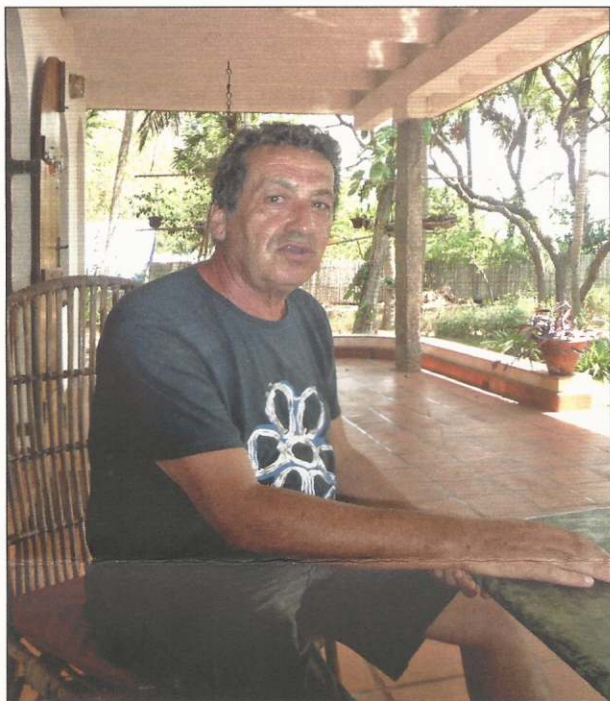
favourite place for Aurovilians to live. It's too far from Auroville. Nowadays, people like to live close to the centre, where there is schooling for their children and where they can more easily participate in cultural events and workshops."

But there is a deeper reason, he feels. "The idea of a resort came, in fact, from The Mother – you can find it in *Mother's Agenda* where she talks about a hotel in exactly this place; perhaps this is still a driving force behind the present development." He refers to a conversation The Mother had with Satprem on 23 June 1965, as recorded in *Mother's Agenda* where She mentioned that the Industrial Zone of Auroville would be located along the coast, with a wharf where boats could berth. "North of Pondicherry there is

indeed a rather large expanse which is totally uninhabited and uncultivated; it's by the sea, going northward along the coast And there, there would a big hotel, the plan of which Roger has already done, a big hotel to receive visitors



The swimming pool at Sri Ma



Daniel

rooms; there is a place for workshops; there is a restaurant, we have a small 14 x 14 metres swimming pool made by Giorgio; and, connected to Sri Ma, there is a splendid beach." The demand is already larger than he can

from outside."

The plans for the city later changed, and Mother moved the Industrial Zone to its present location. But Daniel, who first came to live in Sri Ma in 1977, has never forgotten Her original concept. "I always had an attachment to this place and was always dreaming about developing it."

In 2005/6, the Funds and Assets Management Committee, after rejecting a proposal to sell Sri Ma, decided that the place could be converted into a resort. "And now the time has come," says Daniel. "But in memory of those early days, I have called the restaurant there 'Tanto Far Beach.'"

Tanto, for those not familiar with Auroville, is the name of a pizzeria Daniel started some five years ago at a place earlier known as New Creation Corner. A second pizzeria was opened last year in the Auroville Outpost, on the East Coast Road. The business is thriving, he says, with the yearly turnover crossing two crores. The resort seems set to follow this trend. Since December last year, Auroville already received more than Rs 3 lakhs income from the resort's activities.

"I'm good at doing business," says Daniel. "But I'm doing it as a service, I have no greed. Business does not mean that I have to make money for myself – I live in a 30 square metres

room with my wife and child, not in any of the houses in Sri Ma. What's important is the flow of money – not what you own, but what you let pass through you."

But, he says, Sri Ma is not open to tourists or day-trippers. The facilities are there for guests and Aurovilians who like to use the pool and restaurant or even stay for a weekend to have a breather on the beach from the intensity of Auroville.

"We have no beach erosion here," he says. "Luckily for us, the Quiet community did not succeed in getting a groyne built in a nearby village. If that had happened, our beach would most likely have suffered the fate of Repos, whose beach and houses were swallowed up by the sea. Instead, the Sri Ma beach has increased since the 2004 Tsunami from 70 to 120 metres."

The Sri Ma resort has a bright future, says Daniel. "The response of those who stayed is uniformly positive and the guests tend to connect to Auroville, to the point of wanting to help its development or even becoming Newcomers." The plans are ready to develop Sri Ma into a resort-cum-convention centre with at least 54 rooms. This would provide employment to Aurovilians, and, perhaps, be a training place for hotel-school trainees.

Carel

housing



Newcomers, is expected to be ready August this year

an ongoing or new housing project and move there once it is ready. If the completion of the new housing project is delayed, the Newcomer can continue to stay in *Maitreye II* as long as is required."

Joseba also points at the new rule that Newcomers can get the money paid for a new house back if they leave. "The Newcomer period lasts for only one year, which is too short for the Newcomer to make that big commitment of donating the entire

costs of the house, which now cost between Rs 20-30 lakhs, to Auroville. The new rule is that, during the one-year Newcomer period and then for a period of five years from the date of having become Aurovillian, they can get their money back if they decide to leave Auroville."

Maitreye II is a testing ground for the Housing Service. There are about 55 Newcomer units spread all over Auroville, but this is the first time that one building will house so many Newcomers together. "We are curious how it will work out," he says.

Temporary housing

A few years ago, the idea to start a project for temporary housing was mooted, called *Transit Lounge*. It would serve as an interim solution to the housing crisis by providing low-cost 'dismountable' houses for a maximum period of two years. Eight different models of dismountable houses were presented. But the project was objected to by a number of Aurovilians and finally got stuck.

The concept, however, hasn't died. The Housing Service is now trying to develop a temporary housing project in the *Pony Farm* area; the *Citadines* community is also willing to host 13 dismountable units of 12 m² each with common kitchen and toilets to accommodate young people without means who want to experiment Auroville. These units would be connected to *Citadines'* electricity, water and waste water connections and be demolished when permanent

housing come up in that area.

These two initiatives are in contrast to attempts made to build houses in existing communities. "More often than not, the residents object because they do not like the prospect of years of building activity and noise," says Joseba. "But finding solutions to the housing crisis, even if they are temporary, is a community responsibility, imposed by Auroville's ideal of fraternity."

Carel



The first six flats of the Invocation extension

HOUSING DEVELOPMENT

The Procurement Support Service

Under the aegis of the Housing Service, a Procurement Support Service (PSS) has started and is now in its sixth month. PSS aims at supporting Auroville projects and Aurovilians by bulk purchasing of building materials, and by providing technology and services. In the process, it wants to ensure efficiency, transparency and accountability of transactions and resource utilisation. The initiative has shown positive results. During the first phase of the project, more than 20 projects were assisted by PSS, which resulted in savings in excess of 15% of the regular procurement prices. As a next step, PSS wants to support Auroville projects and residents who have smaller requirements by catering to their 'retail' needs, such as a few bags of cement, a few lengths of steel, DIY kits, a plumber for a few hours, etc. PSS has submitted a request for a site for a storage space, and ultimately a warehouse, in the Service Area, where in the near future Aurovilians can get their building materials and support at prices lower than in Pondicherry.

SacredGroves: a model for

Thirty-five sets of quivering and outstretched hands meet in the center of a large circle to pump up and down three times – a great instantaneous “whoop!” is shouted – and they are tossed into the air. Another work day at SacredGroves has begun. These hands belong to the women and men that make up the design, project management and construction team responsible for completing Auroville’s SacredGroves, an affordable ecological community living project currently under construction. The team is composed of a rotating group of individuals from disparate backgrounds, each one bringing a unique skill set and purpose. Most striking is the number of individuals in this morning circle that have come to SacredGroves as volunteers and interns, paid in kind through housing and meals, and committed themselves for a minimum of three months to the project. “Does everyone know their team? Everyone all set?” Manu Gopalan – concept designer, architect, project leader, manager and general group motivator – checks in before the teams take off for their stations on the red clay work site.

The SacredGroves community, Manu’s brainchild, was conceived of as an alternative solution to the shortage of affordable housing for prospective Aurovilians that cannot afford the high costs of purchasing a home in Auroville. Three years ago, the emphasis of the project was to develop a new housing approach in Auroville that addressed this concern, with 12 different designs under consideration – including those using bamboo, mud, steel and concrete. This discourse segued into new project criteria: to use only ecological building materials and practices. SacredGroves’ philosophical component as a community that naturally evokes interdependent co-living and generates less monthly bills grew



The daily morning circle discusses plans for the day's work

and the nourishment of the soul.” SacredGroves will achieve this affordable, low maintenance, off-grid eco-housing by incorporating entirely self-sufficient infrastructure, including a power system that uses solar, wind, pumped storage and bio-mass energy; a water system that stores rainwater and harvests grey-water; organic vegetable gardens that provide a substantial amount of produce for each household; active preservation of forest areas on the site; use of thick walls and passive cooling systems that negate the need for air conditioning and even fans; installation of composting toilets; and construction of shared spaces and utilities that strengthen the community’s interdependence.

posed Saturday morning micro-project ideas such as “Cow proof gates” and “Rubble management system.” These micro-projects are usually small, isolated tasks such as building a bench for the morning circle or organizing the tools, with the intention of maintaining a high standard of efficiency and comfort on the job site. Micro-projects are just one example of the strategies leaders implement to keep the teams on task; considering a project of this size that will take many years to complete, long outlasting individuals’ time spent at SacredGroves, many find satisfaction in watching these small projects reach completion.

Volunteer and intern commitment, which makes up over two-thirds of the work force, is essential to the success of the construction of SacredGroves on both a practical and ideological level. This challenging approach to larger scale housing construction, though in part due to budget constraints, is an intentional departure from the usual employment of large truckloads of materials and hired labour that come from outside Auroville. Not only does this lower the cost of construction, but builds the intentional philosophy of the community from the very ground up. Of the volunteers and interns that he guides and advises every day, Manu says: “This approach is superior to an approach in which many hired workers are brought on to the job site because here everyone has come with a fundamental motivation beyond payment. They come with natural passion and drive. Without the element of money, people tend to be more creative and more open to discussion. When people are talking about design decisions in a corporate environment, they tend to be ‘yes’ men or women to the boss. This is problematic because it doesn’t allow for objectivity and makes it difficult to analyze the real value or worth of different ideas in a detached way. Egos become enlarged and people tend to stick to a hierarchical approach of response. Here, there is a lot of freedom for people of all levels of experience and backgrounds to say what they feel will and won’t work.”

The tendency to take ownership ideas and manifest this attitude during the construction process is exactly what SacredGroves is lacking, and objectively speaking, is exactly what seems to allow it to thrive. The experimental process of refining building techniques levels the playing field and encourages all interns, volunteers and labourers to actively participate in decision-making; awareness that there is always a better and more efficient way of doing things keeps egos at bay. It is this compassionate and dedicated discourse that allows social boundaries to disintegrate; the traditional structure of decision-making and delegating tasks is leveled. When asked about their interactions with the paid workers on the project, the volunteers and interns mention that occasionally there are basic language difficulties, but enthusiastically agree that once they began working alongside the labourers a feeling of comradeship immediately grew. Shreya, an architecture intern from Mysore, appreciates that no one is treated differently here: “Elsewhere, you wouldn’t know the workers’ names. Here, you work with them and you have fun with them. They treat us the same way; that’s what happens. If you look at them one way, they look at you a new way...they share their lives and their families.” Subramani, a highly skilled mason who worked on the Matrimandir, has been a vital resource for many of the interns who had no practical experience on a job site before, perhaps had never even learned how to take measurements. Shyama, an architecture intern from Mysore, acknowledges the wealth of information the Tamilians hold, having worked with the earth their entire lives. Shyama mentions her gratitude for this opportunity, adding: “In a more sterile or corporate environment, you lose the opportunity to learn from others.”

The drawbacks of unpaid labour

To ignorant eyes, the work site is still just heaps and craters of red clay dirt. However, over the course of a week, one notices significant marks of progress as the clay is moulded into the foundation of a new water tank here, and the foundation of the first apartment there. The pace at which the job site evolves is a reminder that work is being done entirely by hand, with minimal use of machines. This is beneficial to the design of the project. “Here we are in it for a longer period, and need to look at it with a more reflective approach,” Manu says. Naturally, there are also drawbacks to using a team of two-thirds unpaid labour. The most obvious is the transient nature of knowledgeable and skilled volunteers who have come to SacredGroves to learn specific, practical skills and enjoy hands-on involvement in a project that appeals to them on an ideological level, but have a full-time career or school waiting back home. This is one of the greatest challenges Manu faces: “The coming and going of volunteers is difficult as it is hard to be the hub of knowledge. However, we are lucky to have attracted people who are committed to longer stays, and individuals with highly specialized skills always seem to arrive just at the right time. Until now, we haven’t felt the need to advertise for help. Call it divine chance or providence or whatever you want, but



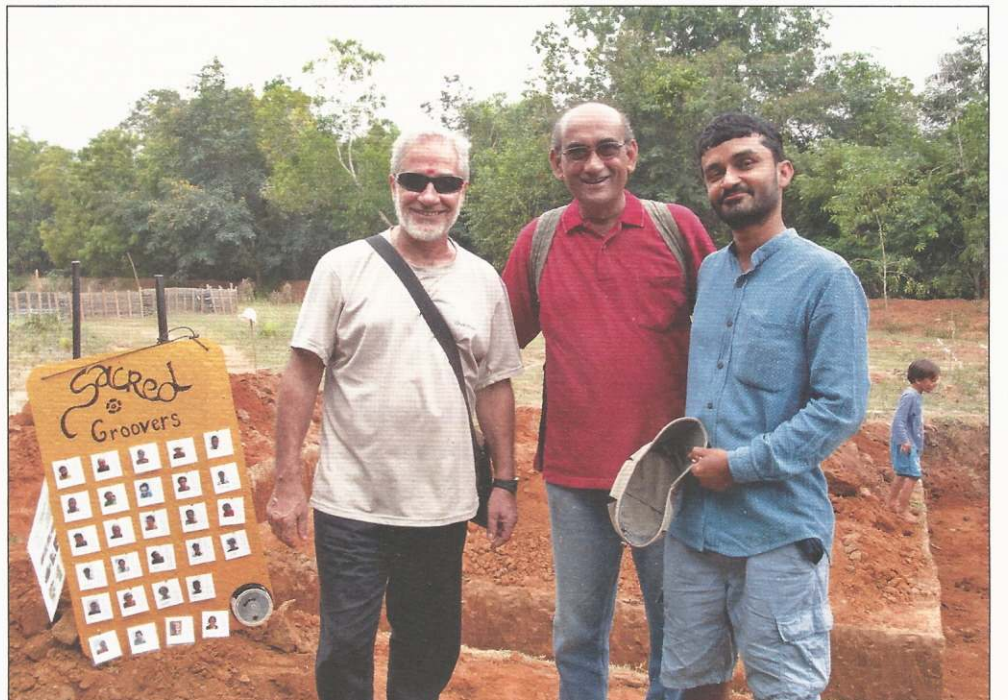
Moving the shuttering made from discarded petrol pump pipes into position for building the walls

from there. Here, families would have more time to spend together and with their community, and quite simply, more time to dedicate to activities that do not require money, but nourish the soul. Ground was broken on July 22nd, 2013 and a tentative completion date has been set for August 15th, 2017. The affordable eco-village will provide 108 homes for Newcomers, Aurovilians and long-term volunteers, and will be available as single, double and family units. The resulting framework and objective of the development is entirely new, pioneering a resourceful and innovative model for self-sustainable, ecological community living, and is being built using only ecologically-sensitive construction methods. With a design that seamlessly integrates affordable high-density housing with farming, agro-forestry, forestry, community living and urban co-working spaces, SacredGroves is replicable in high-density urban areas throughout India and elsewhere. Not only will this lifestyle nurture a stronger, cohesive and more conscious community, but it will also take some heat off the planet.

The notion that individualistic, money-driven and high-carbon urban lifestyles are responsible for the world and its inhabitants’ ever-growing environmental, societal and individual problems is at the very heart of the project. The SacredGroves blog states: “We offer the opportunity for a simpler, more self-sufficient yet inter-dependant and ecological way of living that allows more time for family, community

The intern and volunteer powerhouse

SacredGroves’ aspiration to establish and nurture environmental and societal consciousness as a lifestyle is not mere branding, but something which one discovers manifests itself on the job site every day as volunteers, interns, labourers and project leaders engage in frank discussion over topics like recent technical mistakes, setting realistic objectives and improvement of management strategies. Team participation during problem-solving sessions – whether on a technical or interpersonal level – is mandatory and fundamental to maintaining a unified group and achieving a common goal. The morning circle, which takes place in the “Sacred Circle” under an inviting shelter of trees lined with benches and chalkboards, is a daily and essential ritual at the project site. Each morning, time is allotted for a group exercise, words of the day borrowed from The Mother’s calendar, collective agreement on the day’s task and respective team responsibilities, as well as any relevant discussion of pending large purchases or major construction issues. Loving care is taken to keep this communal space, where meals and teatime are also held, tidy and welcoming. An operations board hangs on a tree for anyone to float ideas or topics up for discussion – below “Water tank centering” someone has written, “Reiki offer” followed by a smiley face. A corner of the board is dedicated to “Initiatives,” where various volunteers have pro-



Key players. From left Joseba from the Housing Service, Pavitra from the Procurement Service and architect Manu

construction with consciousness

one day we will notice a need for specialized help, then somehow someone will come and fill the gap." When electrical expert, Nicholas from France, left to travel around India for three weeks, another electrician, Richard from the UK, turned up the next day perfectly filling in the three week gap. The work force of 35 people is just right at this stage of the project as it allows for teams to work on sub-projects – a larger number would be too difficult as there wouldn't be enough work for everyone.

Project phasing

SacredGroves has been designed in phases; at this moment, the team is still in the "incubator phase," which includes the construction of three homes, a common house for meals and communal gathering and the infrastructure, which includes waste management, water and power systems. Allotment of the first homes will begin in October 2014. The next phase will be up to 20 homes, the next 88, and so on until completion. These phases will take shape in different ways: the first consists of experimenting with the materials themselves, exploring different strategies to organize work crews, tweaking the design and developing infrastructure. As kinks are worked out, Manu anticipates that the process will gain speed and momentum so that the future phases are about replication rather than innovation. The team has anticipated that work on the infrastructure will evolve as each phase of the project is completed, since SacredGroves will not use mega, centralized power, sewage and water sys-

furniture; practices mindfulness of its own construction waste by reusing, recycling and composting as much as possible; and is diligent and aware of its own use of scarce resources like energy and water. The team has developed several innovative building techniques, including the use of "earth concrete," which is a mixture of water, recycled rubble and a small amount of cement.

The far-reaching goals and impact of the project has caught the attention of young architecture students from all over India. India, as an incubator for accelerated technological development and new construction, draws the attention of young people interested in overcoming many of the mistakes that the West made in the 19th and 20th centuries, aspiring instead to jump ahead to the green and environmentally conscious developments of the 21st. The architecture interns are in unanimous agreement that what drove them to this internship in particular was the possibility of working with the materials hands-on, therefore gaining tangible insight into sustainable eco-design methods. Students that have spent their education behind computer screens, thinking solely conceptually, eagerly embrace the opportunity to tactilely experience building materials. Awareness of each element of the building process leads to smarter choices during the design stage, reducing construction waste and stemming the destruction of natural resources, which is fundamental to India's impact on the world. Shreya chose to come to



The workers get a medical check-up from Dr. Venkat

the result of individuals amalgamating both Western and Eastern perspectives and expectations and bringing, at times, diametrically opposing notions of time and organization. The morning circle discussion of how to structure each day would be an example of a classical Western approach. Acceptance that this is simultaneously a creative and experimental undertaking that must first exist in harmony with the earth and its materials might be called Eastern. "This has allowed for a fluid and creative approach to meeting deadlines and expectations. "Relying on creative tension to guide the process is necessary, and in order to evoke more tension, we have to have many more leaders with different approaches in order to bring forth these feelings of tension," Manu remarks. This tension lends itself to the important dialogue of how to develop sustainable techniques that can be used widely, not just here at SacredGroves; it is most important to find out what is sustainable and replicable in other situations and countries. Sandford, a microbiologist from the United States, expresses concern that without this in mind, SacredGroves is at risk of becoming an "artistic project." "It would lose its relevance in solving global environmental problems. This is happening to a certain extent because SacredGroves is very experimental in terms of its volunteer and community nature, so there is a lack of technical expertise and truly long-term management and professional skills. In a volunteer project like this, there still needs to be long-term staff in order to maintain continuity and for technical expertise to be put to use," says Sandford. Small measures such as tweaking communication, making individuals accountable for tangible goals and deadlines, and careful tracking of the planning and building phase of each component are areas constantly in

and responsibilities, and he encourages them to step up. Nicholas, who has taken a couple of turns leading days at the work site, notes: "I came with a lot of expectations, ideas, visions...well, I cannot work here the way I used to in Europe or other Western countries. It was frustrating in the beginning... But manifesting this consciousness of cohesiveness, community, openness and sharing from the start is important. Environmental consciousness is a Western consciousness and instilling this mindset in the workers is one of the most challenging aspects of the project."

So what does SacredGroves mean for Auroville? For the planet? Even in Auroville, a place that was founded on the principle of working together as a community, or city, to build a universal consciousness, one notices that individuals have moved away from aiding each other in the construction of homes. SacredGroves institutes strategies for people to work together again, returning to this objective of building a communal consciousness – one that addresses the needs of individuals, society and the planet. By being situated in the developing world, the mission of SacredGroves represents a psychological shift that has not yet been accepted in the West. SacredGroves' handling of its dynamic tension between Easterners and Westerners – the concept of deadlines, awareness of better building methods, harmoniousness with the planet, expectations for efficiency, simultaneous attention to the needs of individual and soul – becomes a microcosm for a global tension that still needs to happen. As we race the clock to create room for the future billions of people that will arrive on this planet before the end of the century, we must concurrently and constantly reevaluate our conception of time, which arises from the mental burden of needing and wanting. Focusing on deadlines like, "I need



Sunita Narain, Director-General of the Centre for Science and Environment visits SacredGroves

tems, but rather modular upgrades. Each row of houses will have its own shared systems of waste management, power, food growth and water storage. The ratio of volunteer and intern labour to hired labour may change as the project picks up speed, but this depends on the success of the crew's construction of quality living infrastructure at the site; if the crew does well in this stage, the hope is that this accomplishment will attract more long-term volunteers committed to building teams of short-term volunteers around themselves, so that the majority of the construction will be managed by the smaller teams of volunteers. Inevitably there will be more hired labourers, but this will not sacrifice the integrity of the current aim, which is to always have proportionately more volunteers.

Setting an example for greener construction in India

On a larger scale, SacredGroves is a sober reaction to the detrimental and unsustainable practices of the construction industry in India, which is responsible for devastating ecological problems, such as the illegal mining and quarrying of rock that destroys vast new areas of forest and hills in India every day. The dredging of sand from rivers alters their flow, adversely affecting aquatic life. Indiscriminate dumping of construction and demolition waste into the wetland areas surrounding cities results in the saturation of vital water bodies and naturally occurring aquifers. With each of these major concerns in mind, SacredGroves re-uses building rubble from various sites in Pondicherry and Auroville, such as the Matrimandir and Sri Aurobindo Ashram, recycled wood from packing crates, reused discarded petrol pump pipes for shuttering, reused Tetrapak cartons to make innovative

SacredGroves rather than intern at a corporate firm in Bombay where she anticipated working on a product, such as a skyscraper, because she wants to be aware of what her design means for the environment and for the people working on it once it is handed over to a contractor. Venkat, an architecture intern from Chennai, is interested in how a community like this impacts individual lives: "This is changing the way we live! The social aspect is the key thing to focus on," he says. He adds that he will never look at products the same way, and now tends to deconstruct the components of a chair, for instance – thinking, "I can make that myself!" – astutely conscious of the waste that resulted from its assembly in a factory. Gilles, a volunteer from Canada with a background in patenting and theoretical work, feels that his mission is to try to distill the best that the West has to offer: "This is an opportunity to say, 'Don't do this! This is where we've screwed up. Be careful of this!'" There are volunteers motivated by even more personal stories, like Mani, a Newcomer and volunteer on the project, who grew up in a Tamil Nadu village now threatened by a river that has been encroaching on the village for the last couple decades because of ruthless sand dredging and damming. Regardless of the initial impulse, however, the interns and volunteers each independently remark that this has changed their entire consciousness – environmentally, socially, even spiritually – regarding their future designs and work.

Maintaining "creative tension"

A phrase often uttered around the job site is "creative tension" or "dynamic tension," an expression of the daily tension that arises from



Doris and Francis interviewing Manu for a documentary

flux and various stages of improvement. Fortunately, it is this tension that also lends itself to the very essence of SacredGroves as a community from the ground up, and nurtures this inherent trait. The future SacredGroves community will naturally experience this dynamic tension, too, and accepting this challenge now means adopting better methods in the future. Manu feels that in this way people learn rules

to finish this house by August," and rushing ahead using unsustainable practices defeats the purpose of eco-communities and projects such as this one. In this way, SacredGroves becomes a mentor for Auroville, India and anyone else watching, and an indispensable example of a centered and thoughtful, but purposeful, approach to the actions we take.

Kirsten

Fostering leadership

Bindu shares what she learnt from the ongoing Stewardship Workshops being offered in Auroville by Monica Sharma, through the support of SAIER,

I remember an old-timer agonizing that while the Mother gave us this beautiful Charter, she did not leave us with a blueprint on how to manifest the Charter – on how to embody, in the context of building a town, all the values of Auroville pertaining to individual and social transformation. And that lack of clarity on how to proceed constantly trips us – we either wring our hands in despair at our inability to change things and say “thus is human nature” or worse, proceed to build the city with relentless religious fervour in the certainty that if we just get the Crown Road right, or the Crystal right, things will be miraculously transformed.

For the past decade, like perhaps many other Aurovilians, I have chosen not to be actively involved in the governance of Auroville. I have turned down all offers to serve in a working group for I felt, from the experience of a previous decade, that all such efforts were largely futile – governing systems were too strongly entrenched in a certain paradigm for an individual to make a difference. So, apart from occasionally joining a discussion on AuroNet, I have chosen to live a life of relative isolation, finding meaning and embodying Auroville’s values within the context of my personal life. I must admit I was not entirely happy in my choice, for as Sri Aurobindo says, the collective and the individual are connected and mutually dependent for their fulfillment: while an individual’s inner growth has a positive effect on the society, society provides individuals with greater opportunities to express and fulfill themselves.

Something shifted, recently. At a meeting where we were discussing how to build on the educational potential of Auroville, I found myself asking other participants: “What are the values that you personally stand for? What are the values that underpin this educational project? What is the greatest impact that you want to achieve from this work? What systems do you want to shift through your work?” We all took turns in answering these questions, finding common ground in our values, and deeply reflecting on why we wanted to take up this new project. And while answering the question on the impact that I wished to achieve, I was surprised by my own reply: I said that by changing how we work in this organization (our new project-team), I wanted to change the organizational structure of Auroville; I said, if we could transform governance and money and society in our organization, it would be a fractal that could be repeated in other working groups in Auroville.



The leadership workshop at the Unity Pavilion

potential to source their wisdom and creativity from the deep fount of spiritual values, Monica begins the workshop by “flattening all hierarchy.” In this recent workshop, she got old-time Aurovilians to get up from their tables and mix with newcomers or with young African students who were also participating. She got the Tamil and French groups huddled in their separate corners to similarly mingle with others. As one old-timer Tamil Aurovillian told me, on that first day of the workshop, it was heartening to see how easily those lines of division between Westerners and Tamils were dissolved. In this space that allows for cross-cultural conversations, in a methodology that is based on experiential learning and peer-based learning, participants are empowered to find transdisciplinary strategies for immediate application in their work. Participants engage in holistic exercises where they concurrently root themselves in their values, reflect upon the changes they want to see – the systems they want to shift – and then list the actions, within a time-frame, that they will take to accomplish what they want to do. In my experience, this is radically different from Auroville meetings where people discuss Auroville’s values endlessly or jump into action immediately without enough reflection.

The workshops are not easy, mind you. It took me a while to get used to Monica’s direct and brusque manner. I used to hate being called up on to the stage to be publicly coached by her. I used to hate the long hours of a three-day session. But through it all, I discovered Monica’s absolute love and dedication to bringing about the best in each of us. Just to watch her in action is to learn through example: I have never met anyone who is as sharp and as present as Monica is when she coaches for hours on end. I am learning, from her, just to be present to the unfolding moment, without giving in to the prejudices born from the past and projecting them into the future. And I am learning from her and from others how to find practical solutions to manifest my project.

It is not easy for once you complete a session, you commit yourself to triad-practice – meeting two other fellow participants on a weekly basis for a month. For as Monica says, it is only through practice that we change our ingrained habits and strengthen newly-formed neural pathways in our brain. It is not easy, for in the end what is expected of us is to bring Presence in our work. The tools we are given are to foster meditation in action, so that

we can listen deeply to others, speak effectively, and most importantly, generate new conversations for action. New conversations that hold the possibilities of change and the seeds of transformation. Conversations that allow us to turn obstacles into opportunities and breakdowns into breakthroughs, grounded, as always, in the values that we stand for.

It will not be easy, but finally, after many, many years, I am encouraged to dream again. To dream of building this ideal society that I came to build twenty years ago. Auroville has so much potential for the transformation of humanity, for by its very vision of being a city it encapsulates all the activities human beings engage in, and if we can constantly source and act from the Divine wisdom that is in each of us, we have the leverage to transform our activities, our society, and humanity itself.

What other participants say:

I got real time practical experience, and I learnt a lot from my co-participants. This was the uniqueness of the workshop as compared to other programmes I had attended.

I learnt to act from my inner capacity and dream big. I learnt it is possible for an individual to make a big social impact when we are grounded in our inner wisdom. I learnt how to convert breakdowns to breakthroughs.

I learnt how to break free from mental models that hinder our efforts to recognize our inner wisdom and give undue importance to our fears.

I learnt about the importance of embodying personal and group values in our projects.

I learnt that leadership is about deep listening, effective speaking, and generating new conversations for actions. It is about the courage to act despite one’s fears.

Monica recognizes all of this – she recognizes the potential of Auroville, which is why she has committed herself to coming here, and offering these workshops for free, for the next three years. She recognizes the hiatus between our vision and our reality from her own experience in working with United Nations. What she narrated about United Nations, about how meetings and documents begin and end with relevant excerpts from the Declaration of Human Rights, but little changes in-between, echoed what I have experienced in Auroville – of how we hang our Charter at the door-post, but for the rest it is business as usual. And yet, just as much Monica, over the years, by fostering leadership has generated measurable changes within the United Nations and has made a difference in the world in areas as diverse as female genital mutilation, sex-slavery, HIV/AIDS, and rights of street-labourers, so also I believe that it is possible for Aurovilians to truly live up to their ideals and manifest humanity in action. It will not be easy, for what Monica demands of us is an unwavering commitment to always act from our stand – from our values – and not just mechanically apply the tools that she gives us or mime a newly-developed vocabulary. But yes, even as all around us things flounder and fail, I see the shimmer of new possibilities and have a gleam of hope.

Bindu



Monica Sharma

Something shifted recently, because for the first time in years, I find that I am discovering a blueprint in how to embody the values of Auroville in action – in the context of my work – and by doing so, I am helping bridge the gap between our vision and our reality. Something shifted, not miraculously because I had achieved a higher consciousness through my meditation practice, but because I had committed myself to participating in the long and rigorous stewardship workshops for emergence and diligently practised the tools I had learnt in my daily life and work.

The stewardship workshops that have been offered in the past two years in Auroville, are facilitated by Monica Sharma, a former UN Director of Leadership and Capacity Development who has worked with the United Nations for 22 years fostering leadership in leadership and capacity in forty countries in a variety of social contexts. In an age, where people are busy promoting themselves on the internet through social media, Monica does not even have a website promoting her work, let alone a facebook account. Despite requests from Aurovilians, she refuses to give inspirational talks about her work, for she knows that little or nothing changes through words. It is through action, through walking our talk that we have to achieve the paradigmatic shifts that will change our work-place and the world for better. As was mentioned by a participant at the recently-concluded workshop in Auroville, we have to “build the ship as we are sailing it,” or, in the context of Auroville, we have to discover the blueprint for developing the city as we build it.

In the workshops, participants are not subject to lectures or explanations but are led to discover insights through intensive coaching by Monica. Recognizing that all individuals have the

Dr. Monica Sharma, is a trained physician and epidemiologist and worked with the United Nations for 22 years, during which time she served in several leadership positions including Director of Leadership and Capacity Development. Currently, she engages worldwide as an International Expert and Practitioner on Leadership Development for sustainable change. She designs and facilitates programmes for whole systems transformation and leadership development. Using cutting-edge transformational approaches and methodologies, she fosters results-oriented partnerships with universities, governments, civil society, business, media and United Nations. She is committed to build capacity in people from all walks of life to foster equitable and sustainable change. In 2009, she received, from the UN Committee on Spirituality, Values and Global Concerns, the “The Spirit of the United Nations Award” because of her inspirational leadership, skilled wisdom and devoted attention to the world. Since 2011, she holds a special chair and is visiting professor at the TATA Institute of Social Sciences.

Fraternal Auroville

Auroville Today brought together some Aurovilians to discuss an aspect of Auroville which, although very powerful and alive, is often neglected in our media and presentations to the outside world – fraternal Auroville. Anandi is part of the team which manages Pour Tous Distribution Centre; Suzie has been involved in education for many years; Joseba works with the Housing Service; and Ashatit at present manages the Auroville Library.

Ashatit: My experience of Auroville is that its very basis is solidarity, sharing, and fraternity. From there we have developed all the services, and even the first commercial units developed out of this spirit. I remember when I worked in Housing Service we decided to ask people who were constructing houses to donate 10% of the cost so that others less fortunate could also have housing. 95% of the people immediately said 'yes'. All this flowed naturally out of this spirit to serve The Mother and to serve each other.

Suzie: Many years ago, Bhaga, Ganga and myself formed a team called the Caring Service. We had no physical base or budget, but we invited Aurovilians to submit any request for help and we would try to satisfy it. Requests included things like a food safe or help with conflict resolution. One young Aurovillian asked for a leather jacket and a girlfriend! We managed to satisfy quite a few of the requests. The Caring Service, which ran for 10 years, was an early research into how to meet those needs which fall outside the official frame. A lot of young people appreciated it because it was idealistic. Towards the end, Olivier joined our team and he was inspired to start the Mahasaraswati Free Store, which still serves Aurovilians today.

Anandi: Similar initiatives today include Ange's Anonymous Goodwill Conspiracy [see box] and the Golden Fund which helps long-term Aurovilians in need. These are efforts to link people to people outside our official organization.

Ashatit: This is a particular feature of Auroville; our civil society is extremely active. Here we are in a quite different situation from ordinary societies where the state looks after many things, and this is why we have so many initiatives which help us support each other when we are in need. For example, a friend of mine had a problem with his old motorcycle, he put a note in the News and Notes, and within two days he had money for a new one. Then again, in the Auroville Library we needed new shelves. We had no resources, but we put out a call and suddenly the resources were there. If you live in this world, you have the feeling of living a constant miracle. If you need something, you just have to be open and patient and it will come to you. Fraternity, for me, is a flow.

Joseba: Sri Aurobindo, when referring to the revolutionary triad of liberty, equality and fraternity, said that we cannot expect conventional societies to develop the latter concept because fraternity depends on the development of the psychic centre, not the mind. In contrast, in Auroville we should actively promote the full development of fraternity because this will give our society its most distinctive and specific character.

Today we know there are many initiatives by individual Aurovilians to help others outside the



From left: Suzie, Ashatit, Anandi and Joseba

established administrative framework, but in the Housing Service we believe that this fraternal aspect should also be organized at the normative, policy and institutional levels of Auroville.

In housing, we have two tendencies coexisting in Auroville at present. One approach is that an architect who designs a house or apartments will take 6% or 7% of the total cost as his fee, the usual fee recommended by the Indian Council of Architects. But there is another group of architects who don't want to do this, who just want to receive maintenance for their work. This is what I call the fraternal approach to housing.

One example is the SacredGroves project, where the architect works for maintenance and the workers are volunteers. Apart from anything else, this makes the cost of housing much cheaper. So, in the Housing Service we want to prepare policies that express and materially support this kind of fraternity. In fact, we are already doing a lot along this line. We help individuals and families with insufficient funds to get housing or build extensions through our Fraternity Fund or through channelling funds for public constructions like Inspiration. Our Repair Fund, which takes care of people working in Auroville Services, covers 50% of the repairs of a house, and we also facilitate interest-free housing loans up to Rs 50,000.

Anandi: These are welcome developments but, at the same time, there is another trend in our society which is more consumer-oriented and individualistic. I think the present maintenance system strengthens this sense of individualism because you receive a certain amount of money which you can use in whatever way you wish. In this way, instead of strengthening our service sector and providing more and more services to people without cash exchange, we are going in the opposite direction and away from that sense of a collective based upon fraternity.

I think the idea of offering your work to Auroville and of the community taking care of your needs remains our dream and we should try to reach that. Perhaps right now is not the moment because the consciousness is not ready for this. But, in the meantime, I think it is important to create spaces where those ideals can manifest in some way or another, protected spaces where some of us can experiment in trying to make it happen.

Joseba: One experiment that is special for me is Sadhana Forest. This is an experiment in living exclusively in fraternity. Volunteers come here from all over the world, they offer their work, food and accommodation are provided, you don't even have to pay, but the experiment

is running perfectly well.

In fact, one of the most interesting things happening over recent years is the number of volunteers who are coming to Auroville. Sadhana Forest has more than 100 volunteers every month and there are more than 30 volunteers working in SacredGroves at present.

Anandi: The children of the 60s had this call to travel, to be free. But this new youth feels called to serve, to experiment with a different world. It is a new wave which is happening all over the world.

Joseba: These people come to Auroville because they want to experiment with community, with the sense of fraternity, which they can't find in their own countries.

They come attracted by the ideal. For me, this is the essential element we need to fully realize for the future of Auroville. If we can create the ideal society about which Mother spoke, a society based in all its aspects upon fraternity, this will generate a huge amount of enthusiasm and collaboration from people like these volunteers.

Ashatit: If you don't focus your mind on the problems in Auroville, you realize that this spirit is already here and growing stronger. I believe something new, more harmonious and more caring, is spreading among us day by day.

From an interview by Alan

The Anonymous Goodwill Conspiracy

Ange started the Anonymous Goodwill Conspiracy a few years ago. She was aware that while there are people in need in Auroville, it is often difficult for friends to give money to help them because giving can cause an imbalance in a relationship. Either the giver becomes a target for further requests or the receiver feels patronised.

"It all began," says Ange, "when I built my own house. At the time, I didn't have the 10% extra to donate to the Housing Fund. Later, when I could donate it, I learned that somebody needed money for doing housing repairs. I asked the Housing Group if my contribution could be channeled anonymously through them to help that person, and they agreed. I realized that this was probably a wider issue; people who occasionally found themselves in a position to help neighbors and friends – but wanted to do so anonymously. So I went public with the idea."

There are three ways in which people can give anonymously to people they wish to help. Either they can put cash in a sealed envelope which they give to Ange. She, in turn, will find another person, who doesn't know the identity of the giver, to give the envelope to the receiver. Alternatively, a giver could transfer funds to the Financial Service account number of the Anonymous Goodwill Conspiracy (252090) and inform Ange by mail, who will ensure that the transfer is made anonymously to the receiver. ("Otto was so happy with the idea; he said it was like a breath of fresh air"). The third channel is the Housing Group. Joseba has agreed to be a channel for people who wish to help specified others with housing repairs.

"Sometimes the donations are quite small, but it's not the amount which is important," says Ange. "What is important is that the person in need no longer feels cut off from the rest of Auroville; they don't feel any longer they are alone with their difficulty. And this restores their faith in community."

Ange won't accept unspecified money. "It has to be a specified giving, because it involves caring, it involves looking around and seeing if you can identify a particular individual in need. In this way, I think everybody in Auroville can be supported or receive some help, because everybody knows somebody in need, and even if they cannot do something themselves, they can get friends together and make a collection."

It is an idea which has obviously touched many people's hearts. So far 560 people have given money to a very wide range of Aurovilians through the Anonymous Goodwill Conspiracy.

Alan



The pitfalls and promises of joining Auroville

If you join Auroville looking for a spiritual utopia, look again. If you are expecting a city of divine peace, where people wear white, have blissful smiles and sit in circles chanting "Om", radiating the tranquillity and serenity you have always longed for, think again. If you think that your presence in Auroville will be welcomed and you will be talked to with interest, better change your assumptions. For Auroville isn't like that.

Seen from a superficial level, Auroville is a city where people live their lives just like everywhere else in the world. Aurovilians have their difficulties, their relationship ups and downs, people feel happy, sad, content, at peace, in bliss – just like anywhere else.

The difference is at a deeper level. From what I have seen and experienced, there is an energy in Auroville so powerful that it will force you to change. Whatever you have run from, denied, hidden, been afraid of, or spent your life shutting your eyes to, you will be forced to face it. That energy will bring every demon in the darkest corners of your being to the surface, it will turn you inside out, knock the stuffing out of you, all in

order to change you.

If you are here for only a few weeks or months you may be lucky (or unlucky, depending on how you look at it) if it doesn't happen to you. But if you are thinking of coming to Auroville for a prolonged period of time, prepare for the ride of your life. For the power of this place is not seen, it is felt through your blood, your cells, through the very air you breathe. Your soul feels this, your spirit reacts and answers the call, if you are ready.

That energy not only brings up what was hidden, but also the help to conquer. It manifests through your fellow Aurovilians, who will be there as and when you need them. You'll find healers who will allow you to scream and shout and cry out your pain with an understanding, calmness and acceptance so great it will shock you. You will find a support system here like none you have ever known before.

I myself have been through this 'hell' and am still partly within it. Soon after I joined Auroville, I started working but my four-year old back pain got gradually worse. Though I tried hard to ignore it and said to myself "NO this is NOT happening", the inevitable happened. I fell apart. It was as if, because I would not

look at the truth, my body took over and stopped working, leaving me only wanting to sleep and cry. For I was feeling pain like never before, a non-physical pain. I was facing the torment of my own inner demons and the traumas of my past, the dark hidden secrets deep inside. But I have been helped – by my fellow Aurovilians who did so without condition or judgment.

Since then I have been moving slowly but surely forward, in territories I never had the courage to enter before. It may be two steps forwards and one step back but it is still a movement and it is a gift. It makes me aware of the reality of having the Divine, the Mother's presence within oneself, throughout and around. I am One, I am loved and I will come through this. This I know with absolute surety.

So, for now, my priority is working through whatever needs to be worked through, whatever the energy of Auroville brings up, with the help, support and love of the family I have found. I do so with the absolute knowledge that I will become stronger and forever changed and healed in ways that I never could have imagined.

Shelley

A single embrace

The third edition of the yearly Auroville Holi Tango Festival began on Thursday March 13th at Cripa with a few minutes of concentration. A hundred and twenty dancers stood together in utter silence, holding within themselves the question, 'What am I looking for? What is my tango?'

The spaces, as in the previous years, had been decorated by Smiti and Shrishti and their team. A few dancers had already sneaked by the three different venues to find out where we would dance and spend our days studying. Eagerness was tangible.

This year's theme was harmony. If the last two years had served as first steps for the organisers to lay some foundation stones of Argentine Tango in India, this year, the dancers, having gained some experience and grown in maturity, entered the troublesome age of tango teenagers. Hence, the festival had two responsibilities: to open as many doors as possible to the dancers and urge them to find out where they want to go so as to truly discover their path in tango; and to ensure that, as tango diversifies, it does not push the dancers apart into their own little bubbles of so-called 'style', or worse, 'truth'. We had all gathered here for exactly the same reason: to dance Argentine Tango, in a single embrace, in harmony.

Of the 120 dancers present, 40 participants came from Auroville and the surrounding areas, along with 5 long-term guests and volunteers. Thirty dancers took the overnight bus from Hubert's Tango School in Bangalore, 13 came from India's youngest tango community in Pune, 11 dancers made their way down from New Delhi, 3 came from Mumbai, 2 from Chennai, and 4 from Puducherry. Added to that were 12 participants from Europe, from the UK, France, Netherlands and Germany? and 3 from the Americas.

To cater for all these dancers, seven teachers were invited. First and foremost were Caterina and Pino from Turin, Italy, who had been the soul of the Auroville Holi Tango Festival since it started

in 2012. They had caught the heart of the Auroville dancers with their energy and particular approach to tango, simplifying this popular dance and art to make it accessible to all, in its very essence. Their demand is that each student develops a capacity of observation of the body as a whole, not of any of its parts, and from the inside-out. "Bodies," says Pino, "are made of energy. Listening to the music, they emit vibrations. These vibrations make us dance tango."

Vaggelis and Marianna, a young Greek tango couple came from Athens, bringing with them a typical academic style of tango, of great elegance and joy. European Champions of Tango Salon in 2013, they were the sweetness of our festival. Focusing on all the details of the posture, the embrace and the walk, they brought quality and attention to all those basics that a dancer with a little more than a few months tango to his experience tends to forget and neglect. They put themselves at the disposal of all the students, with their smiles, encouragement and their insistence to dance with every single one of them.

A veteran of tango, Gladys from Argentina, brought her rich experience of a very typical and cultural Argentine tango. A strong woman, she led difficult classes and challenged all the ladies, both technically and emotionally, to find ways of expressing their femininity, allowing none to hide in the ill-named role of the 'follower'. To complete the teaching were our two young tango teachers from India: Hubert from Bangalore is well-known to us. His elegance, care and humour, and his incredible work for tango both in Auroville and Bangalore, has made him stand-out from any one else. And there was Vivek, also one of the tango pioneers of India. This year he has started touring the world as tango teacher. Every time he visits Auroville, he

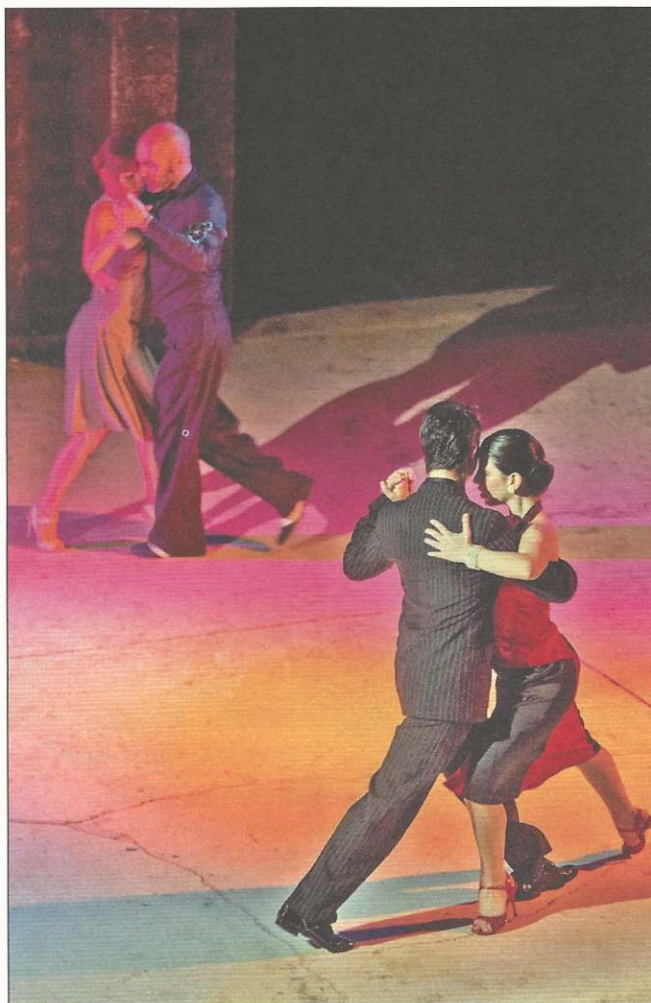


PHOTO CORLIAN

The partner you dance with becomes your instrument to express yourself. He/she is not your neighbour, your friend or a stranger, someone you like or do not. He/she is tango.

In the discussions, one word jumped out again and again: fear! And every time Pino would ask: fear of what? Of letting yourself go? Fear of emotions? Can one be afraid of one's own emotions? No! What you call fear are in fact emotions, but emotions are neither positive nor negative. They are energy, they are what your tango will use to express itself. This is tango, you have chosen to dance it. So either do it completely or drop it, but to do it, you must learn to give yourself, not to the person in front of you, but to tango. It will take care of you, it will take you by the hand and guide you, but you need to do your part, study, observe, and learn to give yourself more and more."

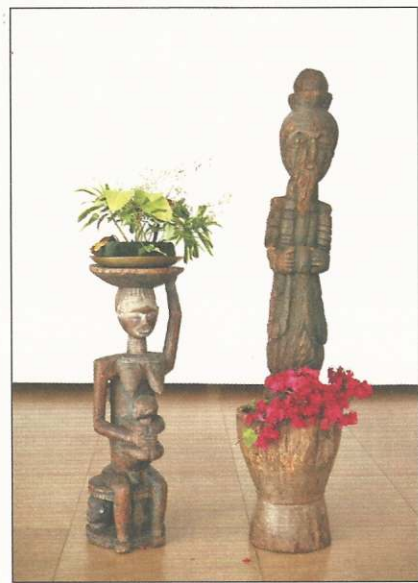
We have often been told in Auroville, "The tango you dance is not the tango of Buenos Aires." That is true. In Argentina, tango was born of the streets and ships; it was accessible to any who wished to dance it. It was a dance born in sadness, in separation. But it doesn't need to be that way. Tango doesn't need to be sad, or sensual. Tango, as an expression of oneself, must be full. Full of whatever one decides to fill it with. In Auroville, ever since Hubert first came and formulated it for us three years ago, we aspire to fill it with the very best each of us can be at the moment. Not negating the rest, but to look at what we tend to hide, accept it and embrace it and transform it into energy. And every year, we taste the joy of seeing how much can be done, with a little push, with the simple aspiration to grow and the willingness to give oneself.

Aurévan

ENVIRONMENT

Collaboration is Key

In celebration of World Water Day on March 22, an informal gathering of 30 people working with water was held at the Unity Pavilion. The morning session brought water scientists, healers, engineers, administrators, educators and more, as well as a few curious guests, together to share information on their water-related projects, discuss water concerns in Auroville, and brainstorm possible modes of collaboration.



The Rain God of Mali and his partner look on throughout the water discussions. The statues are destined for the future African Pavilion



Water scientist, long-term guest and volunteer, Lars Kostedde, presented his work on water treatment and quality protection

The group readily acknowledged that the Auroville bioregion water situation is in crisis mode, and generally agreed that collaboration is necessary to move forward. Information gathering emerged as a critical first step in collaboration, as many lamented the significant loss of water data collection since 2008. Many also valued increased communication between those working on water projects within Auroville, suggesting that similar meetings take place more regularly. One comment, that you don't have to be a water expert to join in the process, received an enthusiastic show of support.

In the afternoon, three different people presented their current work on water to a smaller group of 17 people. The first was on water treatment and quality protection, the second on the crystallography of water, and finally a presentation on healing through water (Watsu).

While water projects have been going on since Auroville's inception, organizers hoped that this World Water Day event would mark a turning point to recognize the need for collaboration within the Auroville water community.

Ing-Marie

REFLECTION

Widening the frame

I think it is easy in Auroville, as in all small communities, to get caught up in the details of our lives. And, because there are so many challenges on so many levels while our ideal is placed so high, it is easy to get depressed and negative both about our individual progress and about the pace of community development. But if we widen the frame we get another perspective. 'Widening the frame' means seeing that we are extraordinarily privileged, blessed, to be part of this unique experiment in individual and global transformation. And to be here on Earth at this moment when, after aeons of slow, painstaking work, Sri Aurobindo and The Mother have brought us to the brink of a quantum leap in the planet's spiritual development.

This does not mean that we neglect our daily challenges; that we put on rose-coloured spectacles and wallow in some 'hippy-dippy heaven' instead of rolling up our sleeves and wrestling with issues like town planning, governance or the Auroville economy. Actually, I think this widening of the frame means we have to work even harder on solving all our individual and collective issues because, from this perspective, these are all opportunities to hoist ourselves, if only a few inches, towards a new level of consciousness.

Of course we will fail, time and time again. But what is important is that we have this opportunity at this crucial moment in Earth's history, as well as the all-important confirmation from Mother that the essential work has been done; that the Supramental Realization will surely be, even if the timescale is uncertain.

All this is surely a cause for intense joy. So why can't we make this joy the permanent underlying note that weaves its melody through our daily lives?

Who knows? If we can approach our challenges with this undercurrent of joy rather than of exasperation, anger or fear, perhaps we will discover new ways of being with each other as well as of solving our problems.

Alan

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Editorial team: Alan, Carel, Larry, Mandakini. Proofreading: Alan. DTP: Carel. Photo editing: Jean-Denis. Published by Auroville Foundation. Printed by Brihat Consultants, Pondicherry, and published at Surrender, Auroville - 605101, Tamil Nadu.

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