

REVIEW BY Pankaj Vir Gupta

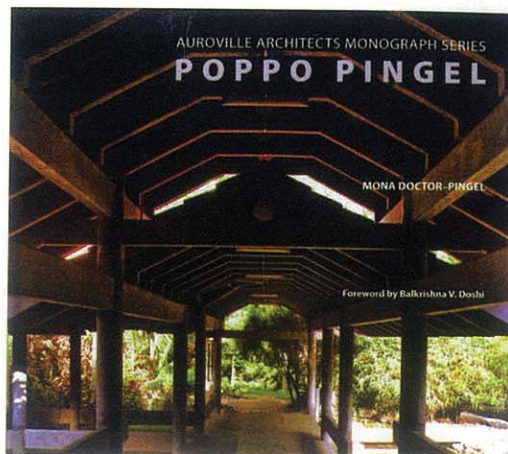
POPPO PINGEL

have appreciated that the drawings embodied the high precision and accuracy that the instruments were about.

The book systematically dismantles the indoctrination of the superiority of the 'western rational scientific' systems as it proves, through careful and meticulous research the availability of accurate and well established methods of recording solar time and other readings in the observatory at Delhi. Jai Singh's idea of social inclusion in the dissemination of knowledge as a remarkable feature of his reign is also highlighted in the book. More such documents need to be out in the public realm for a comprehensive, wider understanding of the knowledge systems embedded in the architecture of the subcontinent.

Unfortunately, as times have changed, the systems of recording the various measurements has changed and we have lost a tremendous science, our belief that it was not valid contributing greatly to that loss. Books like this one will thus, go a long way in providing the counter argument.

Meghal Arya, an associate professor at the Faculty of Architecture, CEPT University has been intrigued by the profound spatial quality achieved in the crafting of architecture in the arid regions of India. As a practitioner, an advocacy of inclusive public spaces has been her niche contribution to her partnership firm Arya Architects.
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related to the human scale, nurturing the senses, giving the spirit space to breathe, and if the project allows, pointing to the spirit itself in its simplicity and playfulness. If most of these are achieved, beauty comes by itself, spreading subtly serenity and well being. [page 25]

POPPO PINGEL

AUTHOR Mona Doctor-Pingel

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I come from the school which is very practical and straightforward, where the aesthetic is developed from the material and not the other way round. Art or architecture that is not rooted in, or honest to the material and its craftsmanship – form for the sake of form – does not excite me.

My terms as an architectural recipient are: clarity in design – clear overview of design as in a single brush stroke; honesty in the structure – everything is revealed, nothing is hidden; spaces

Most architectural monographs documenting the practices and practitioners of 20th century India have been limited in one respect – they have not sought to look too far nor too wide. Beyond the codified geographical confines of Ahmedabad, Chandigarh, Mumbai and New Delhi looms a vast and architecturally disparate India, where singularly talented and zealous iconoclasts have pursued, and still pursue, creative visions worthy of scrutiny if not emulation. Unfettered by constraints of conventional practice and the inevitable dilemmas of the commercially driven architecture in urban centers, some of these architects have created a nuanced and highly contextual body of work. Sensitive to their material and climatic context, disciplined by limitations of labor and funds, and exuberant in their innovations and experiments, they have succeeded in achieving an all too rare clarity of aesthetic expression.

With the first of her Auroville Architects Monograph Series, Mona Doctor-Pingel has chosen to introduce one such “pioneer” to a wider audience – Poppo Pingel.

First as an architectural trainee in his office and subsequently as his wife, Mona possesses a unique vantage from which to represent Poppo’s life and his life’s work – both are inseparable. In outlining his journey from Germany to India, she describes a self-possessed traveller, with talents and preoccupations that one would characterize as anachronistic in this day and age.

Poppo likes to remain master of his own time, limiting his commissions and commitments to invest his energies in activities besides architecture that enrich and empower him to grow. Archery, archaeology, painting, calligraphy, health and healing are all pursued with a Teutonic zeal and depth. Simultaneously, his attempt is to apply in daily life the writings of great masters, like G.I. Gurdjieff or Carlos Castaneda, Hugo Kuekelhaus, and of course, Sri Aurobindo and The Mother, to a point where they form part of his total world view, and thereby, his work. [page 22]

The first– and perhaps the most fascinating – section of this monograph introduces some of Poppo’s personal preconditioning – his rootedness in the high-craft traditions of German master-carpenters, his commitment to service in remote parts of India, his ability to improvise and marshal his skills as a teacher, an artist – both painter and calligrapher, and a largely self-reliant innovator. Perhaps the most fortuitous confluence occurs with Poppo’s selection

as the German representative to attend the foundation ceremony of Auroville. This encounter has largely framed the course of Poppo’s professional and personal life for the past forty five years.

The inception and evolution of Auroville – the launching of a galaxy shaped City Master Plan as a spiritual or cosmic enterprise, representing a union of residential, cultural, industrial and international zones, and the creation of largely self-sustaining pockets of inhabitation – remains an exercise in evolution. Both metaphor and model, Auroville embodies the transformative power of Integral Yoga, as practiced by the devotees of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother. From a barren, sun-baked plateau as depicted in an archival photograph from 1968 [page 11] to a growing community of approximately two-thousand residents, Mona Doctor-Pingel credits Auroville’s architectural progression over the past few decades to “pioneering architects – Roger Anger, Piero and Gloria Cicionesi, and Poppo Pingel”.

The second section of the monograph documents some of Poppo’s most significant works, anchored in the community of Auroville. From his early experiments with village housing incorporating rammed earth construction, to the more complex conceptions of the Fraternity Workshops and Kindergarten, the Udavi School, and the Afsanah Guest House, the architecture remains refreshingly vital and honest.

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Beyond his obvious skill with designing sensitively scaled spaces, Poppo’s work extracts a lyrical balance between the modulation of light and its play with material and space.

The final section of the book introduces Poppo Pingle through the lens of his collaborators, friends and former students, reiterating his indomitable personal quest:

“Poppo is forever occupied in the systematic ordering of a collection of fossils, stones, photos, articles and prehistoric pottery, giving the onlooker the impression that his work on the design projects at hand or organizing the annual archaeological digs is just an extension of his life work of weaving stories of nature, man and history.” [page 170]

Despite its obvious formal rigor, this monograph presents an architecture that reveals a profound engagement with humanity while expressing ample generosity of spirit. Poppo specifies that the Kota stone floors in the school be left unpolished so the children’s feet encounter texture and are “pleased”; classrooms look out onto Japanese inspired lily ponds with blossoming lotus; recycled building waste is artfully composed into paving patterns for walks in the surrounding landscape. For all this and more, Mona Doctor-Pingel has authored an indispensable work – one that should absolutely enable a more generous recasting of the major protagonists in the architectural canon in India.