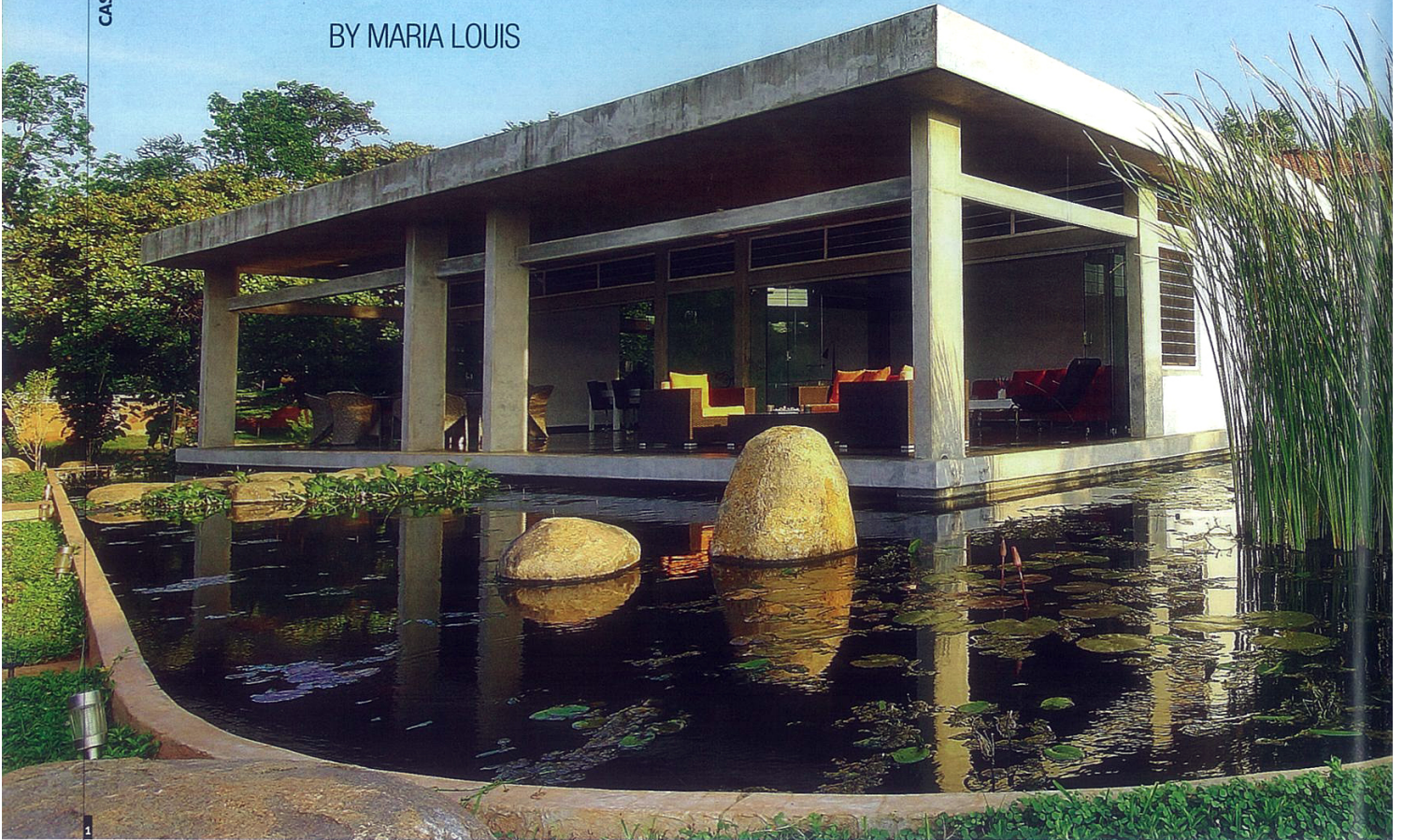


# TEMPLE OF BLOOM

TEMPLE TREE RETREAT IS A MEDITATIVE SPACE WHERE ONE CAN ENJOY CONVERSATIONS WITH NATURE

BY MARIA LOUIS



A carefully-laid-out rough granite stone pathway and precast concrete garden lamps lead to smooth boulders that serve as stepping stones over a lily pond wrapping itself enticingly around the arrival verandah, fostering a sense of wonder as one enters the guesthouse. The soothing sound of a water fountain greets visitors, inviting them to relax. The ponds and the profusion of greenery around seem to merge with the verandahs of the elevated ground floor structure, and each room has a well-laid-out garden – both in front and at the back.

Communing with nature is at the crux of the foundation of Auroville, an ongoing experiment in human unity that has captured the imagination of people from around the world. They come from all age groups, backgrounds, social classes and cultures, representing humanity as a whole. Presently, around one-third of the approximately 2,400-strong population from around 50 nations is Indian, but all of them are international in their outlook and approach to life.

My encounters with members of this creative community of artists, architects, designers, musicians and dancers left me

yearning for a visit to this idealistic township-in-the-making that the Divine Mother who founded it hoped would eventually accommodate 50,000 people. Last month, I succeeded in ticking it off my bucket list, but that fleeting experience of tranquillity just whetted my appetite for more. And I know just where I would like to stay when I make my way back.

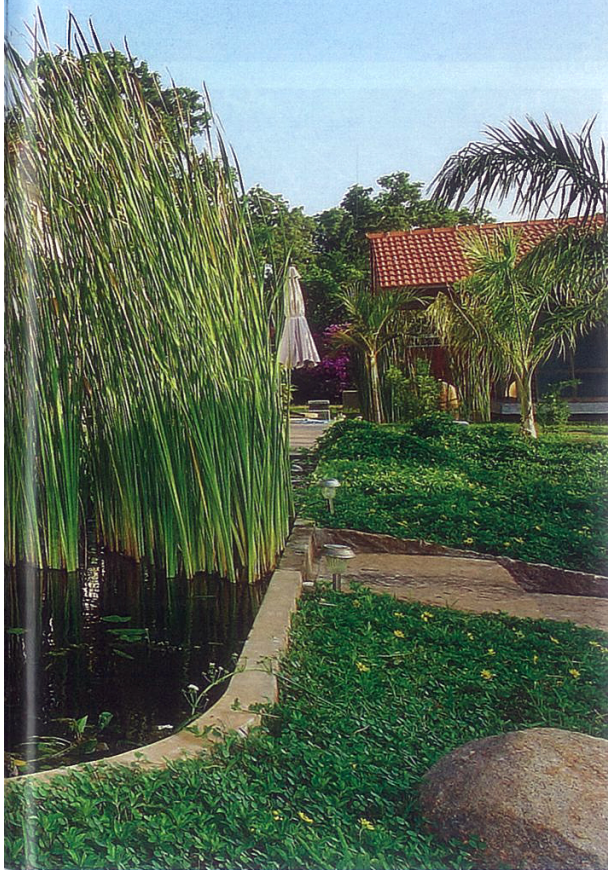
After an early morning drive from Chennai, which lies around 150kms north, I find myself in the 'peace area' comprising the Matrimandir and its gardens, an amphitheatre with the Urn of Humanity that contains the soil of 121 nations and 23 Indian states, and a proposed lake that will not only create an atmosphere of serenity – but also serve as a groundwater recharge area. The perfect place to spend time in reflection and meditation, it set the tone for my next stop.

My first glimpse of this refuge from the routine of city living was at a photography exhibition by architects Mona Doctor-Pingel and Poppo Pingel. When Mona makes a presentation on *Architecture of the Senses*, as she did at the preview of this exhibition at the InCITE Gallery in Bengaluru last month, she does so from a passion born of experience.

Speaking about a building as a third skin and quoting

1&2. The arrival verandah at the Temple Tree Retreat is surrounded by ponds and plants; the glass table within reflects the greenery outside.





PHOTOGRAPH: JASMIN PATEL

Goethe (“The hands want to see, the eyes want to caress”) comes naturally to the principal architect of Studio Naqshbandi, who was drawn to Auroville during her student years at CEPT, Ahmedabad, and has made this meditative environment her home. These notions, which she expressed and illustrated with suitable images, are echoed in her work.

Temple Tree Retreat, one of Studio Naqshbandi’s latest projects, has been designed in response to client Nalin Patel’s vision of creating a welcoming atmosphere “for those who want a serene and beautiful place to retreat to, after meditating at the inner chamber of the Matrimandir.” This 1,000sq-m residence-cum-guesthouse sits on a 4,000sq-m plot of land on the outskirts of the green belt of Auroville. Naturally, the design responds to and engages with the landscape and sky, facilitating a dialogue between nature and the observer.

It’s interesting to discover how Patel arrived at the name for his guesthouse. “It’s a combination of several reasons,” he discloses. “The Temple Tree or Frangipani or Plumeria is the only tree we know that, once it has lost its flowers and leaves, the flowers blossom first – and then the leaves. It’s an unusual phenomenon. The Mother’s spiritual significance for the

PHOTOGRAPH: JEREMY CARROLL



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## MEETING ON COMMON GROUND

**Mona Doctor-Pingel on how challenges are met when client and designer see eye to eye**

Any project big or small, residential or institutional, requires an inner response of the architect to an outer/external need of the client/society. Every project then necessarily reflects the inner poise and values of the architect at a given point in time and space, which are then translated into a built form. Of course, the best condition is when the client and architect are in sync with the vision of the project and each one enjoys the trust and respect of the other.

This is what we experienced at the Temple Tree Retreat project. Due to certain similarities in our background and life perspectives, the design process and its construction was harmonious. Both of us come from a Gujarati background, have chosen German life partners, and have lived and worked in Germany. This created a strong base for understanding the concerns of economy with practicality without compromising on perfection.

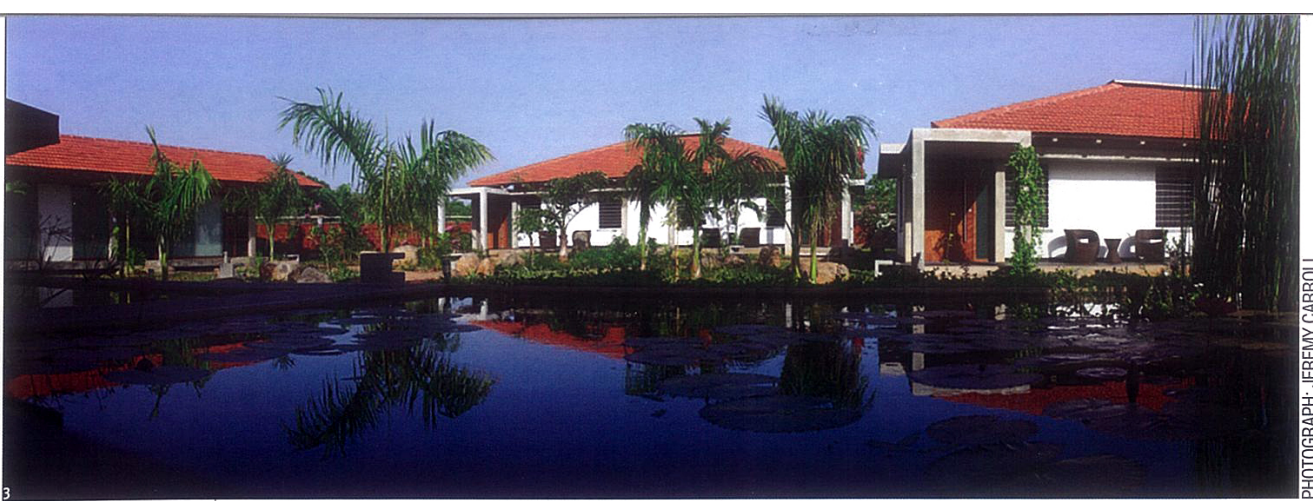
The aspiration was high: to create a peaceful and beautiful ambience that allows visitors, especially those having visited the inner chamber of the Matrimandir for meditation, to remain in a meditative space. To fulfill this requirement, one of the measures we took was to cut down on the number of cottages/rooms that the client initially visualised. Of course, that meant that the payback period would be less – but in the long run, it will prove to be the right decision.

Another challenge was the lounge-dining space. We struggled to find the right balance between the indoor-outdoor relationship here, with the pond being a major attraction. Making all spaces mosquito proof was important to the idea of being at rest and peace in the evenings and early mornings – the times that are best suited to relaxation, but also the times when the mosquitoes are most active. However, in the end we decided to have no grills or wire mesh as a screen in between the pond and the covered lounge. This proved to be the right decision, since it is one of the most used and loved spaces where the guests can hang out and meet other guests.

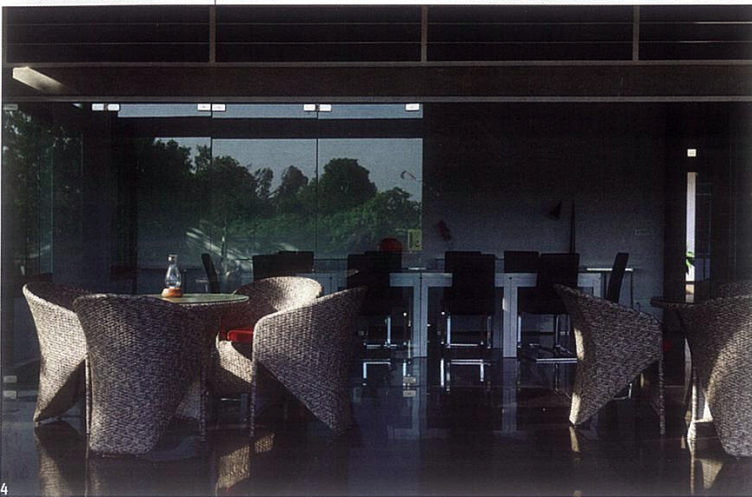
A major challenge was the idea to have a ‘natural swimming pool’ that is part of the overflow from the pond adjoining it – the underlying idea was to allow the clear water of the pond (with fish and plants in a layer of clay and earth) to flow into a natural pool (sans the plants and earth), where people can swim like they would in a natural village pond (so prevalent in the South Indian landscape and other places in India). This would require no additional energy for filtration and no chemicals, as the water would be constantly recycled and cleaned by the fish and plants.

This arrangement worked well for a couple of years, until the constant algae formation along with a couple of harmless snakes convinced the client to go in for a small filtration plant. Again, the solution was found together by introducing a surface filtration technique with minimum disturbance to the landscape and infrastructure.





PHOTOGRAPH: JEREMY CARROLL



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flower is 'psychological perfection'. The words 'temple' and 'retreat', both give a feel of peace and rejuvenation."

Patel always dreamt of starting a boutique hotel that would offer comfort while providing an oasis of peace from the bustle of everyday life. "Someone visiting the Matrimandir or the Sri Aurobindo Ashram should be able to come back to the Retreat and enjoy an inner peace for longer periods," he explains. "We believe in balancing life on four pillars: mind, body, soul and heart. So, we try to offer our guests special personal service in this spirit."

When he first saw the site, Patel had a "good gut feeling" and felt a strong energy of peace. His brief to the designers was to create a place where visitors to Matrimandir's inner chamber could relax in a meditative ambience. Apart from that desire for an atmosphere of tranquillity, he wanted to create something that expressed beauty in simplicity. He also conveyed his preference for locally available material that was subdued and did not draw undue attention.

Designed around an internal courtyard for light and privacy, the main house contains a kitchen, dining area, two guest rooms, and a private apartment (on the first floor) that opens on to a terrace garden. Mona tells me that the sloping roofs use precast concrete rafters cast on site, refining the technology that was developed by architect Poppo Pingel for Afsanah Guest House. Black Cuddapah floors, sliding glass windows with grills, panelled teakwood doors, exposed concrete sills and lintels, with a sprinkling of free beams for scale and continuity, complete the simple palette of mostly indigenous materials. Plastered walls made from hollow clay blocks provide for adequate sound and thermal insulation.

Each cottage has only two spacious rooms offering all the amenities for comfort, with a garden and porch for relaxation.

3. The buildings, which seem to float over the water, share a beautiful relationship with the landscape and sky.

4. The breakfast porch where guests can meet each other.

5. Each room has a private garden with hammocks and precast slabs for seating.



PHOTOGRAPH: JASMIN PATEL

## MATERIALS & SUPPLIERS

**Flooring:** Polished and rough black Cuddapah stone

**Stone:** Granite boulders for landscaping, granite slabs for pathways

**Tiles:** Kajaria

**Ceiling:** Exposed concrete

**Roofing:** Terracotta tiles with precast concrete rafters assembly with GI sheets, thermocol and bison board (to make it ant, rat, squirrel and termite proof, while giving thermal insulation)

**Lighting /light fixtures:** LEDs

**Wall partitions:** Hollow clay blocks, plastered (porotherm), Iceberg marbles for meditation and massage room, frosted glass with wooden frames

**Wall textures:** Mainly white plastered, special effects in each room by Murales, India; Italian wall art: Murales - Gabriele and Stefano

**Dado:** Kashmir gold granite in bathrooms, white ceramic tiles  
**Tables:** Made locally in Kalimardu, teakwood and glass; some in cane and glass

**Chairs:** Cane, leather and steel

**Sofas/soft seating:** Designer furniture

**Bath-tub:** Customised; made in ferrocement and painted by Murales with special epoxy resin

**Sanitary fittings:** Jaquar

**Air-conditioning /HVAC system:** Samsung





PHOTOGRAPH: JEREMY CARROLL



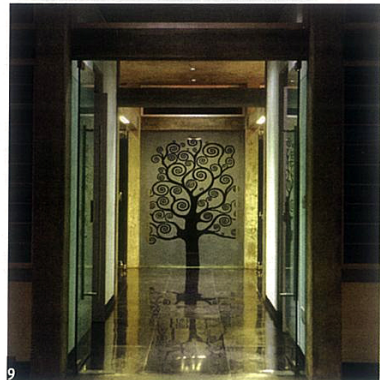
PHOTOGRAPH: JEREMY CARROLL



PHOTOGRAPH: JOHN MANDEEN



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## PROJECT DETAILS

**Name of the project:** Temple Tree Retreat  
**Area:** 1,000sq-m built-up  
**Location:** Kuilapalayam, Auroville, South India  
**The client:** Nalin Patel  
**The designers (architecture, interiors and landscape):** Studio Naqshbandi  
**Design team:** Mona Doctor-Pingel, Arusha Shridhar Drouin, Sonam Kesarkar, Kriti Gupta  
**Logo graphics:** Poppo Pingel  
**Contractor:** Mohan Ayyanar, Alankuppam, Auroville  
**Supervisor:** Elumalai Santhiran  
**Structural engineer:** Tamizarasan  
**Masons:** Elumalai, Muruganm, Logu, Arumugam  
**Painters:** Nallathambi, Krishnan, Ramesh  
**Plumber:** Shankar Rajandran  
**Electrician:** Balu Mani  
**Steel works:** Murugan Manibal  
**Carpenters:** Mani, Parthiban, Ramanjum  
**Solar water heating system:** Sunlit Future, Auroville  
**Waste water treatment:** Biological system - DEWATS with Vortex: Aqua Engineers, Dirk Nagelschmidt, Auroville  
**Cost:** Rs 3 crore, approx. (including interiors and landscaping)  
**Duration of project:** 2009 - 2011  
**Date of completion:** January 2012

6. Courtyard with Temple Tree plants in the main building ensures light and ventilation in the rooms.

7. Each room is spacious and has been given a different colour theme by the Italian painter team of Murales.

8. The meditation space entrance with granite slabs 'floating' in water.

9. The entrance porch to the guest house has a stylised tree of life etched on glass.

10. The private apartment on the first floor opens on to a terrace garden.

The main building with its lounge and verandah is perfect for an intellectual exchange of thoughts and for communication with like-minded people.

The meditation and yoga pavilion is the place where the guest can find complete peace and solitude. The pavilion nestles over a pond between the main house and cottages, designed to open up to the landscape when needed. The use of white marble for the flooring and wall panels allows for a diffused light quality, lending the chamber a sense of sanctity.

"The indoor-outdoor continuum enhances the sensorial experience," points out Mona, whose studio was responsible not only for the architecture and interior design – but also for the landscaping around the buildings.

That probably explains the harmonious execution and ambience. While designing and executing the landscape, Studio Naqshbandi planted indigenous varieties of trees and bushes, keeping the watering to a minimum and using recycled water and sprinklers where possible. They also planted teak trees to mitigate the quantity of wood used for building.

Patel recalls that there was perfect communication between client, architect and contractor. "The partnership paid off,

and is reflected not only in what has been created – but has also turned into a friendship," he discloses. "Every visitor and guest is absolutely awed by the place; and when entering the site, one not only feels the strong energy here, but is then stunned by the beauty of the place. The architecture of the buildings, the interior decor and the landscape, all create harmony and give a feeling of tranquillity and light."

The challenge for this very satisfied client was that he was not always present, as he was hopping between Europe and India. But that was easily solved with today's technology, which facilitates designs and drawings to be sent via email and discussions and conference calls to be held via Skype.

Since Patel was open to experimentation, a 'natural pool' was created – allowing the water and fish from the lily pond to be channelled into an area, sans the plants and the mud bed. This 'biopool' avoids the use of filtration or chlorine, and is a self-regulating body. To keep away crawling insects, it is connected to an ant channel running around the building.

The seamless interaction between indoor and outdoor spaces is probably the result of close collaboration between Studio Naqshbandi, the contractor and the client. **AS**