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Auroville, an international city for human unity, near Pondicherry, India, is one of the few modern towns that was not founded along a river or a trade route, nor did it have an attractive context; it was built on a barren wasteland. Delegates from 124 nations came together in 1968 with earth from their home countries, to inaugurate the town and set forth the vision of its founder Mirra Alfassa, or 'The Mother', of Integral Yoga – where matter and spirit, the individual and the collective meet in a living laboratory for an evolving human being. Mona Doctor- Pingel is a resident of Auroville, since 1990, who set up her own architectural practice, Studio Naqshbandi, in 1995. She is also a researcher and has had 2 years of experience at L'Avenir d' Auroville (the official Planning and Development Group).

**Could you tell us about working in the Planning and Development Group of Auroville, and its achievements and challenges with respect to realising this town?**

I worked in the Planning and Development Group from 2010 to 2012. The team does not consist only of planners, but in fact comprises of people from all walks of life – committed citizens concerned about the growth and development of Auroville. The decisions made by the planning body are driven by the goals of the Auroville charter, which puts forth the ideals of the society that have to be maintained. The charter is an important driving force for the development of the city. The Auroville Charter states:

- "1. Auroville belongs to nobody in particular. Auroville belongs to humanity as a whole. But, to live in Auroville, one must be a willing servitor of the divine consciousness.
2. Auroville will be the place of an unending education, of constant progress, and a youth that never ages.
3. Auroville wants to be the bridge between the past and the future. Taking advantage of all discoveries from without and from within, Auroville will boldly spring towards future realisations.
4. Auroville will be a site of material and spiritual researches for a living embodiment of an actual human unity."  
(Mirra Alfassa, 1968)

The inception of the plan of Auroville came from a sketch made by The Mother,

dividing Auroville into four zones (Residential, industrial, international and cultural) which was then translated into The Galaxy Plan by architect Roger Anger and blessed by The Mother. This plan forces a population of 50000 inhabitants in a 5 sq km area supported by a green belt around it of 15 sq km. However, since there are approximately 3000 residents currently from 51 different nations, there are as many interpretations of the charter and the plan. While on one hand there is a strong alignment towards the direct implementation of the plan as approved by The Mother, on the other hand there is a belief that the Galaxy plan is a concept that has to be built upon, while also considering its implications on the existing context. For example, the original plan includes high-rise residential buildings, which contradicts the desire that most people who come to Auroville have, of wanting to stay close to the ground, in direct connection with the natural environment. Another challenge in realising this dream has been acquiring the land for it, since we only bought the land that the owners were willing to sell (instead of going for direct acquisition as is the case in most new townships) and a large portion of it remains to be bought. There is also water shortage in the area and the neighbouring villages are growing faster than Auroville itself – around 15000 residents, which poses other challenges to the growth of the town. Moreover 5 of these villages fall directly within the Galaxy Master Plan area of Auroville.

Having said that, Auroville is a society that is empowering and supportive of change, with every 'Aurovillian' fully committed to making this change. Some believe that there is a change in consciousness that comes with

the act of building one's own home, while growing and surpassing each challenge that comes along the way. A lot of experiments are being done here with waste, organic products, educating children about what it means to use plastic, and so on. One such attempt has been to introduce locally made electric bicycles as a means to commute within the town, at a charge of 900 rupees (12 euros) a month

### **How does your own practice at Studio Naqshbandi relate to the vision of Auroville?**

When I get asked this question about what kind of architecture we follow, I always say we practice 'Auroville architecture'. While every project has a different approach, there are some basic principles that we follow – respecting the context, the culture and the climate. We use mainly local craftsmen and technologies, as opposed to employing workers from other parts of the country, owing to the fact that Auroville has created a culture where people are proud of their skills and the work they do. We also make sure that our projects are energy efficient, recycle wastewater and respond to the immediate context.

We work on different types of projects ranging from residences and institutions to factories and larger mixed use communities. While there is an absence of planning rules and regulations in Auroville, we must make sure there is a harmonious relationship with the neighbouring residents. I am also involved in research on energy efficiency and strategies for passive design, and in the process of creating a Building Directory for Auroville by mapping every building by year, location, footprint, characteristics, etc. It is interesting to note that a majority of the houses are built by the owners themselves, rather than architects, so there is a culture of self-reliance amongst the residents.

### **Auroville aims to be a universal town where people, irrespective of gender or origin, are able to live in peace. How does it integrate the local communities from the villages surrounding it?**

The residents of the town and the local communities influence each other. Initially, owing to the mix of people from different countries, and along with it a western sense of "helping", a lot of money was spent in educating the locals. However, today, these villages are richer than Auroville.

Despite our divergent ways of thinking and being, there is more that unites than divides those that reside on and around the Auroville plateau. It is a complex relationship especially due to Auroville's idealism to go for a cash-less society, pollution-free traffic, etc. Many from the local community are official residents of Auroville. This could be because free land (although no one can claim it, since Auroville belongs to Humanity as a whole), food and education that residents of Auroville are provided, could be seen as a means to advance economically. Auroville, being an international community that gives each one the freedom to find their own path, could appear to have a culture that is 'western', although that may not be intended. There is a delicate balance being created here, between the sensitivity of the local communities and the vulnerability of the foreign occupants. It is difficult for people to live between two worlds – while everybody is trying to fit in!

### **What are the future aspirations for the community of Auroville?**

Auroville has been given the freedom to plan everything, but it cannot be done with the mind. A leap of faith is required and a new way has to be found. There is a fear that people may take advantage of the loose system, and being a small community,

Auroville offers everything but anonymity. It would be hard to predict the future of Auroville since we do not know what the new population is going to be and the kind of skills the new residents will have, due to the lack of data and governmental policies that attract people, as in the case of most new towns. In that sense Auroville has always grown organically, as the need arose, which could be a problem or a blessing. With the government planning to build a 4-lane highway through its green belt, things could change a lot for Auroville and make the successful efforts at reforestation over the last 50 years futile.

At the same time, the Indian government has been very supportive, even financially. There is now a recognition that Auroville has answers to a lot of problems, which comes from a great amount of idealism within the community and that is why it is one of the few surviving experiments from those which started in the late 60s of the last century. That is the best thing about India – where, since many centuries, experimentation of any sort of spirituality or religion are considered of high value and every such attempt is allowed to have their own space and rules, making it truly secular. •

### **References**

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