

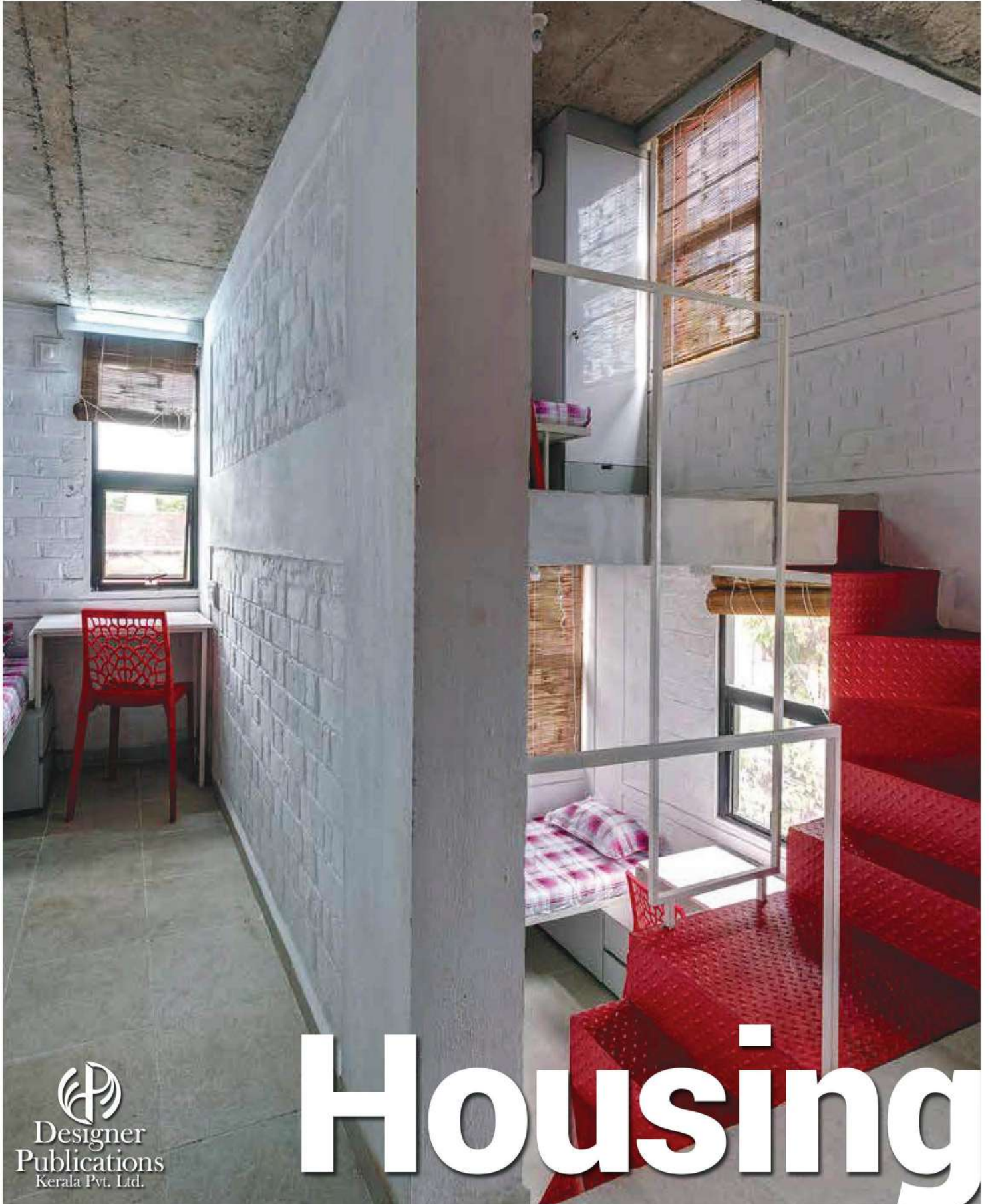


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THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF IIID

MAR 2021 VOL. 02 ISSUE 02 ₹100



Housing



Designer
Publications
Kerala Pvt. Ltd.

Moulding a new social order

Captured by Ar Ridha Fathima through a telephonic interview with Ar Mona Doctor-Pingel

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My practice is based in Auroville and that brings an extra layer of complexity to my work since Auroville is a hotpot of different nationalities and cultures. Each person is unique and different - but nowhere is it as potent as it is here. Especially when it comes to communal housing, where you have to grapple with the sheer variety of temperaments and boundaries of privacy (especially acoustic preferences) that have to coexist with each other.



MONA DOCTOR-PINGEL

Mona Doctor-Pingel studied architecture at CEPT, Ahmedabad and obtained her masters degree in Appropriate Technology from the University of Flensburg, Germany. Based in Auroville since 1995, her studio Naqshbandi offers a personalized approach to each project with a stress on finding the right balance between Man-Nature-Economy. Her projects include Building Biology, landscaping and interiors as an integral part of the design process. Being rooted in Auroville and the local context of rural Tamilnadu has given her an unique opportunity to understand that "slowing down is the first step to sustainability." She likes to write, research and teach and is the author of two monographs on Auroville's pioneer architects: Poppo Pingel and Piero & Gloria Ciconesi.

Striking the Balance

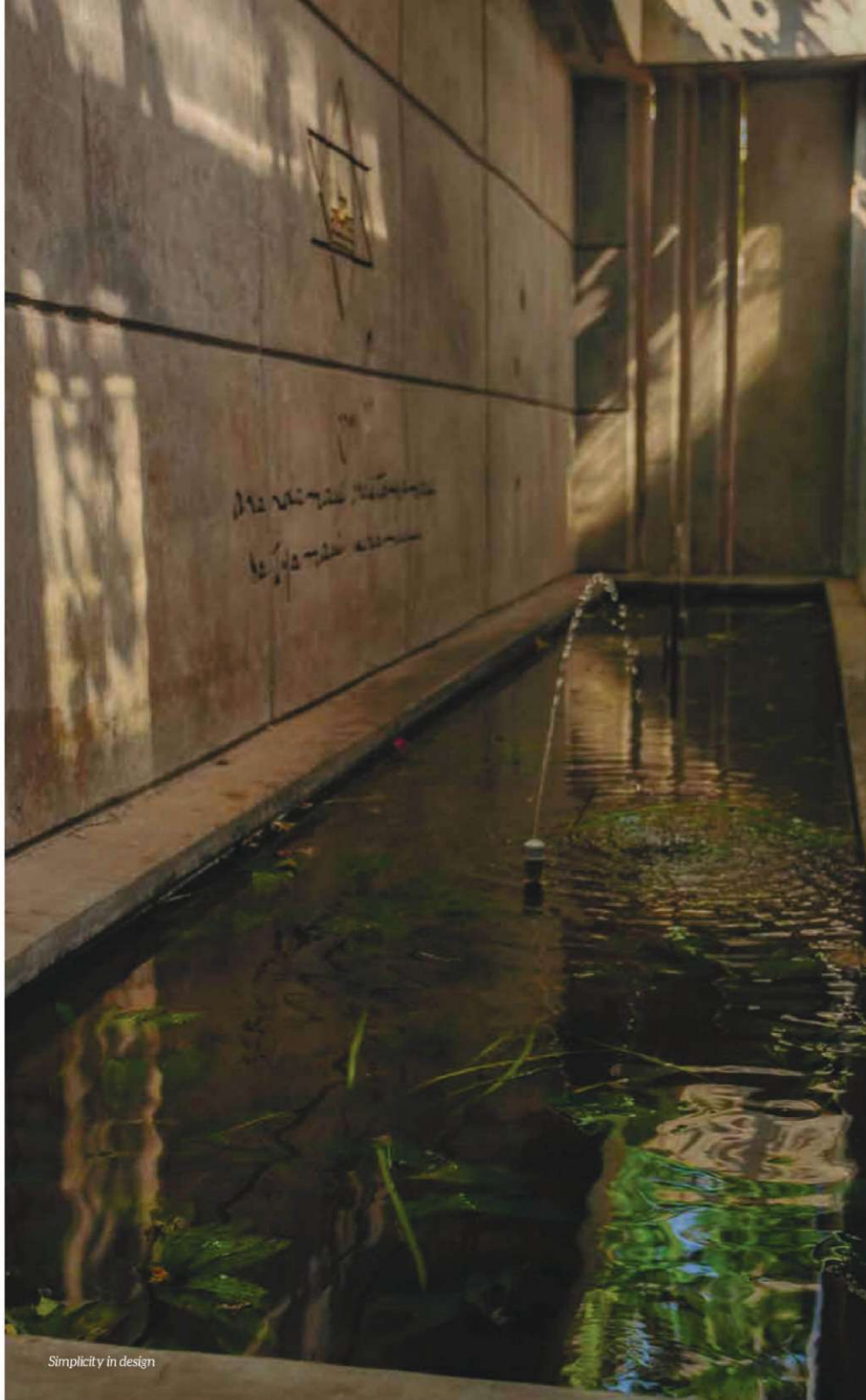
For example, Italians are boisterous people like Indians, but if you consider the Swiss or the Swedes, they are people who like their living spaces to be serene and quiet. If you make walls or double glazed glass windows, so as not to disturb each other, it collides with our priority for providing natural ventilation and natural lighting for spaces. Therefore, while designing for a community, striking a balance while being practical is the essence.

This basic problem has been addressed by many practices in very creative ways, but I am of the opinion that the simplest solutions are best suited for communal living. The more complex a building in terms of using more mechanical and fancy sophisticated

systems which are often not time-tested, the harder it is to maintain and upkeep.

Just like people, buildings also need regular maintenance to ensure a long life. There is no perfect human being, and as the fruit of our limited mind, there is no perfect building.

The issue of privacy and acoustic disturbance has been addressed in my project, Kalpana Apartments (2013, unbuilt) in two ways. I have designed the apartments in two blocks, the North and South blocks. Between them I have provided a central street that is treated in a lively manner through landscaping, which ensures that social interaction - like children playing, people meeting each other, group activities etc. are concentrated there. In essence, the street becomes a conduit for extroverted



Simplicity in design



Establishing a connect between the interiors and exterior

activity, drawing noise to only one area of the complex. This would to some extent tackle the issue of the low ambient noise level of Auroville and allow the inhabitants to have normal conversations in their apartment.

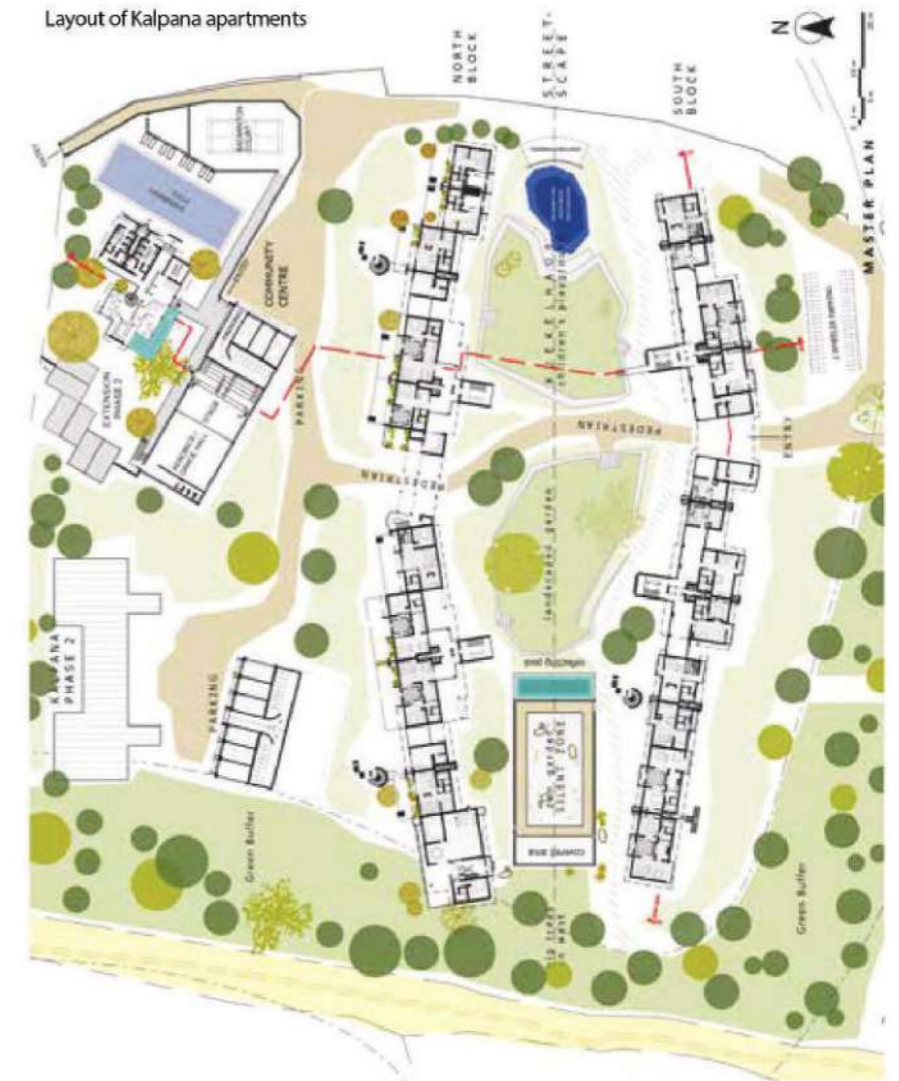
The second solution is that the building is designed in a linear composition with a service bay in the center and the living rooms are alternated. This means two bedrooms or two living rooms of adjoining apartments do not share walls. A bedroom shares its walls with the living room of another unit. I have also done this vertically, meaning no one's bedroom is on top of another person's bedroom, as sound travels in all directions, both horizontally and vertically.

Optimising design - achieving simplicity

Architects today feel compelled to make "loud - look at me" buildings, which often mars the experience of a building. The show-stopping exteriors make way for mundane or worse, intimidating, unfunctional interiors. This may make for good photographs but a building should be a wholesome, subtle experience. There should not be a disconnect between the interiors and the exteriors. I like to think of buildings like people, one should not be carried away with the exterior and forget the inside. Getting to know a person is a process of slow discovery. Experiencing a building should also be similar, there should be an element of surprise, I want my buildings to be discovered again and again with different nuances, details, play of light and materiality.

In Fish house (named after the fish market

Layout of Kalpana apartments



across the road, built 2019) for example, the design had to combat the smell of fish, the menace of crows, noise and dust from the adjacent road which is one of the main arteries of Pondicherry.

Catering to the client's needs, each floor plan is different. The ground plan is dedicated to meditation and visitors, while the upper three floors are private apartments for the family, each with its own entrance and access to a small state-of-the-art hydraulic lift. I had to deal with a dysfunctional family wherein the wife and husband had diametrically opposing views on almost everything. Now the second and third floor are offered on Airbnb and the husband has moved out!

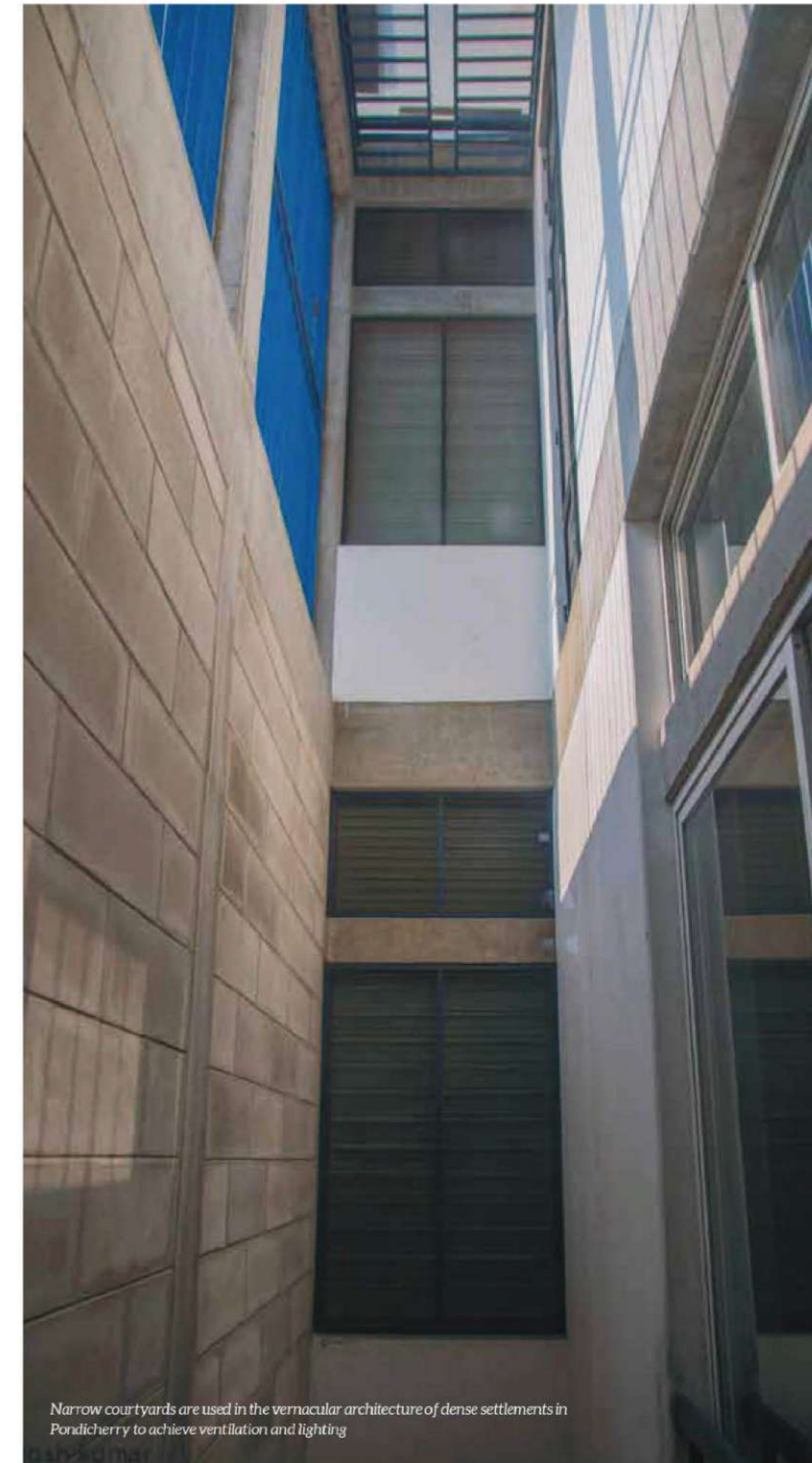
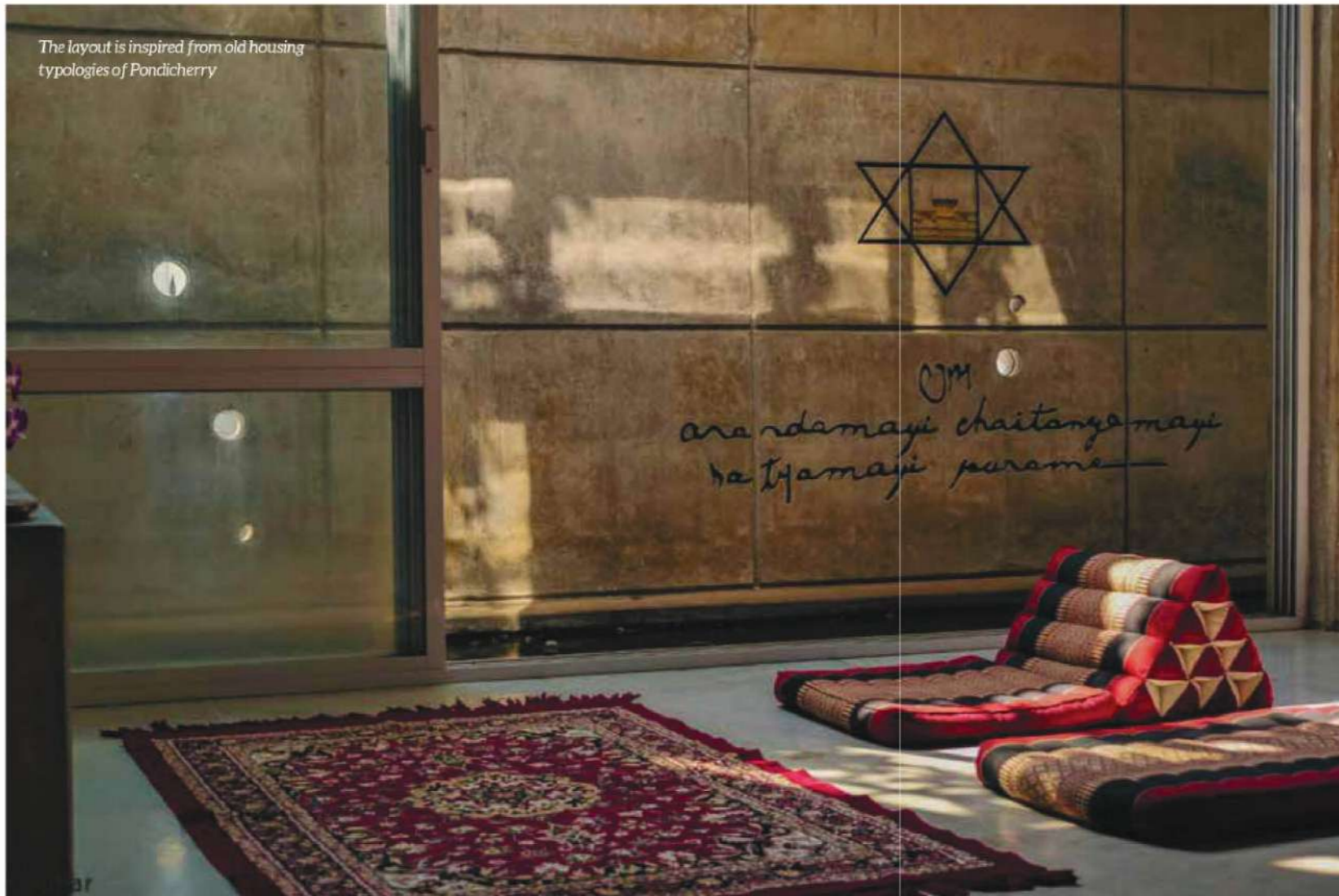
Being a corner plot with the main façade facing east, the rising sun would have heated the building. The easy-to-maintain low tech green wall coursing its way up and down the east and south facades was designed for its thermal and aesthetic properties, as well as to provide shelter for local small birds, which have increasingly lost their nesting grounds in Pondicherry.

After studying the housing typologies of old Pondicherry, we found that small narrow courtyards offer great cross ventilation since there are no setbacks between plots. We used this opportunity to create a small courtyard (1.2 mt wide) that has all the service infrastructure while providing light and ventilation to all the bathrooms. Each bedroom and living room have balconies and the ground floor has a small bio-pond behind the wall which takes care of the major noise from the traffic too.

Sustainability

Sustainability is not a standalone process in the design, but an integral pursuit. To fit into the zeitgeist, designers are foregoing the basic processes of finding a balanced and well-articulated architectural solution to a problem. Stick to the basics – proper site analysis, understanding of the macro and microclimates, sun wind & rain direction, etc. There is always a local solution to problems that are best suited to the cultural practices of a place.

Sometimes quite ironically, things we had discarded for fitting into the international scene comes into the style. Like how Moringa has become such a rage now. Our culture and traditions have their own inherent value, and our present should be about reimagining and reinterpreting that culture for the future, not about disregarding



Green wall on the sunward side helps in temperature regulation



them. I have tried to put this into practice while designing, for example in landscaping which forms an inherent part of our studio's projects. The new landscaping mantra is to use local fruit trees and edible, curative rooftop gardens. These are then used by the people of the community. Since they are indigenous, they hold well in the climate and require the least bit of care. We have built bio-ponds that are simple to maintain without any pumps or exotic fishes by studying the local village water bodies of Tamilnadu. The water is always clear and the play of sunlight reflected on the ceiling or the sound of a fountain from a simple nozzle, running without a pump, is a delight to the senses.

Catalyst for change

The design of communal housing has great potential on a broad scale. Housing is a framework for a way of life. Here in Auroville, we are constantly reimagining lifestyles. We have consistently experimented with introducing new spaces as a way to actualise social harmony and better integration, across different social classes, cultures etc. For example, we have introduced public housing where we tried to erase the traditional organisation of spaces - instead of a private kitchen for each house we have given a public kitchen, where everyone can jointly make meals, or we have given common rooftop social spaces instead of a private living room and so on. We have put into place unique rules for some, like 'no house help allowed', which means the tenants have to do the cleaning themselves. While such interventions have succeeded in certain situations, it is important to accept that it has also failed in some scenarios. One cannot put too many rules with the mind as the guiding principle since change is a slow process and as architects, we cannot be impatient to enforce lifestyle changes.

It is quite evident that we lack a grassroots approach to housing. Housing is a broad category. It can be for the poorest of the poor, like public housing, or it can be for students, senior citizens, the elite of society. We often restrict ourselves to the client brief and do not explore what the end-users really want. It is crucial to have an understanding that we are designing for the community and not only the client. While we must introduce novel methods to aid social change, we have to give people choices. We have to prove that the novel method is better, so that people may adopt it of their own.