

The pink wonder

Jeremy Telford, a resident of US, has set the record for the largest balloon sculpture built by an individual. The giant balloon dog is made of 8,867 pink balloons and is not held by any support structure.

DESIGN TRENDS

# The sense of architecture

**DEBBIE RODGERS** speaks to architects Mona Doctor and Poppo Pingel, whose love for construction of spaces that positively boost the five senses fostered love between them

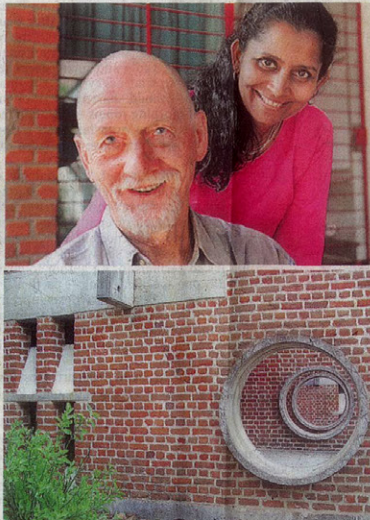
Architecture has become very retinal," says Mona Doctor-Pingel. After 25 years of practice, architecture is not just a passion but a way of life for this resident of Auroville, in Tamil Nadu. Yet, it is not design as we know it, but rather "architecture of the senses" that Doctor-Pingel reinforced to the people of Bengaluru, at an impassioned presentation held recently at InCITE Gallery, an event that was supported by the Max Mueller Bhavan/Goethe Institute and the German Consulate.

To the uninitiated, Architecture of the Senses (AoS) is a construction that will activate and nurture the five senses. There is a school of thought that believes that our current design and construction methods are detrimental to our physical, mental and emotional well-being. AoS that responds to place, climate and ecosystem engages multiple senses, thus positively impacting our thoughts and actions.

Where's practicality?

Yet, how practical is AoS in today's urban environment? "In this case, there is no real difference between rural and urban settings," says this architect, an alumnus from the Centre of Environment and Planning, Ahmedabad, Gujarat. "It is how you deal with different materials, different textures and how you work with nature that makes the difference."

This crusader of all things natural delights in designing corners — the angled bay window (a result of neighbours concerned about their privacy) with its recycled broken tiles, and the Japanese corner with its magical play of light and shadow. Both, at her Studio Naqshbandi, Auroville, are examples of her "femininity with a rational mind". The spirit and soul of this vibrant, charming young woman with her cascading dark curls was stoked, fired, melted and moulded on the anvil of AoS as she traversed Kenya, India and then Germany for her master's degree in Appropriate Technology from Flensburg University (Germany). Yet, the final casting took place when Mona Doctor, on the advice of Architect Laurie Baker, met German architect Poppo Pingel in Auroville, in 1986. As a third-year architecture student she was eager to learn



**DESIGNS BY DUTY** (Clockwise from left) Blue Rain installation; architect-couple Mona Doctor-Pingel and Poppo Pingel; sections of Quiet Healing Centre in Auroville. (Below) A panoramic view of the architects' residence in Auroville.

about low-cost mud architecture. Poppo Pingel, 25 years her senior, was already famous for his experimental village in rammed earth in villages around Auroville. She decided to intern with him. "Poppo has a strong German personality," says Doctor-Pingel, of the man who began as her teacher and ended up as her husband.

The two years they spent building their house together was her sharpest learning curve, for the couple did almost everything themselves — as contractors, landscapers, interior designers et al. "I thought I was an architect with a capital 'A', so I argued endlessly with him!"

There were many "hard lessons" to be learnt from this "rooted, dominant" man who believed in tough love. Later, having

worked on two projects together, the chasm in age, culture and temperament saw the couple part ways, professionally. Born in 1942 in a 200-year-old timber-framed house, in a small village Oestinghausen in north-western Germany, life for Poppo Pingel was simple in the scarcity of post-war times but full of nature's riches, the very environment that nurtured his unique sensitivity to nature and materials as an architect.

Born into a family of master house-painters and locksmiths, Poppo Pingel spent his formative years as a structural carpentry apprentice. "I come from the school that is practical and straightforward, where the aesthetic is developed from the material and not the other way round. Art or architecture that is not

**“RECYCLING IS A LEITMOTIF IN THE COUPLE'S DESIGNS, AS IS USING ORDINARY THINGS IN AN EXTRAORDINARY WAY.**

rooted in or honest to the material and its craftsmanship does not excite me." Vindication of this principle can be seen in Poppo Pingel's design of the Quiet Healing Centre with its curvilinear and controlled meandering design, where he played with the elements of nature, heating therapies and the land.

Artistic freedom

While their lives have been a celebration of AoS, inspired by the iconic Hugo Kinkelhaus, their work, says Doctor-Pingel, has to be seen in the context of Auroville. The non-commercial sovereignty of Auroville has given the couple freedom to experiment. Close working relationships between client, architect and supervisor make it possible

to "develop details with local materials and expertise. Building is then not just a matter of fulfilling a contract but a constant exploration, a joy and a wonder," says Poppo Pingel, one of the pioneering members of this international city of Auroville, near Puducherry.

Embracing both the western technology of Baubiologie (building biology) and our own Vaastu, Doctor-Pingel has learnt to "think simultaneously, not separately", so that her designs are intellectual and sensorial, with a seamless flow of building and landscape. "Another key guiding principle in my work is the creation of buildings that are healthy, taking into account factors like electromagnetic fields, use of natural materials and earth energies," she says.

These principles are upheld in projects like the Temple Tree Retreat in Auroville, where "the inside-outside continuum and the play of water and landscape are important." This concept is also effectively used in her studio, Naqshbandi. Here a water threshold serves as the entrance to the studio, along with a screen of "blue rain" (cotton-mache) fixed on a low, exposed RCC slab. The vaulted studio space around the corner comes with a sense of surprise, as Doctor-Pingel believes that with architecture, as with humans, "not everything should be revealed at once". The high, exposed brick ceiling and flowing black cuddapah floors enhance the sense of space and calmness, while bas reliefs and inscriptions add the playful, quirky elements.

Recycling is a leitmotif in the couple's designs, as is using ordinary things in an extraordinary way. Poppo Pingel used precast concrete rings generally used for septic tanks as a design element in the buttress at the Quiet Apartments, Auroville. Their clever placing makes them appear as non-concentric nested circles, despite being individually spaced. The pond at the Pingel home doubles up as a "natural dish-washer", where fish, snails and birds cleanse the utensils so thoroughly they need only to be dipped in hot water with minimal soap. An original way of keeping the kitchen vermin-free.

Two distinct individuals, yet both, like their architecture, "simple, quiet and understated, not calling for attention", except perhaps for the attention of the soul and the senses.

