

31 Mona Doctor-Pingel (1967–)



Plate 31.1 Mona Doctor-Pingel
Photo courtesy of Mona Doctor-Pingel

Mona Doctor-Pingel comes from a family of doctors, so much so that her maiden name was 'Doctor'. However, her family based in Ahmedabad had decided that she should not become one as there were too many in the family. As a child, Doctor-Pingel was good in drawing and sketching. During her 11th and 12th standards in Delhi, she took up technical drawing. She was exposed to the field of architecture through one of her architect aunts.

Doctor-Pingel joined CEPT University in 1984, but she admits that she was not very excited about the field during her initial years. She did not face any discrimination as a woman at CEPT, either from the professors or during various projects/assignments. In fact, she felt privileged at times since people found it safer to allow girls into their homes for measured drawings or site visits. Doctor-Pingel's experience at CEPT was very rewarding, but she realized it much later. It was only after she underwent practical training in 1987 at the behest of Laurie Baker, under Poppo Pingel, a German architect based in Auroville, that she became passionate about architecture. From 1990 to 1992 she worked with Poppo, during which time they jointly design-built their own house. She got married to Poppo in 1992. However, the urge to go West was strong and she went to Germany the same year when she won a two-year DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service) scholarship to study 'Appropriate Rural Technology and Extension Skills' at Flensburg University.

The programme at the University of Flensburg was particularly designed for the context of the southern countries. Besides architecture, the course focused on sustainability (then called appropriate technology), concentrating on renewable energy. Here, Doctor-Pingel deepened her knowledge of solar energy, mud-block making, wind mills, water harvesting and building biology, of which the latter deeply interested her. Building biology is a multidisciplinary approach to the study of the impact of built environment on the health of people and the planet. Doctor-Pingel was also influenced by the German culture in general, and particularly by their discipline, efficiency and organizing skills. Personally experiencing the history of European architecture that she had learnt at CEPT was an enthralling opportunity for her.

Pingel, who is 25 years senior to Mona, had a substantial practice when they got married. To have a much older and experienced partner in the same profession had its own advantages and disadvantages. He was a strong support in case of doubts and emergencies; at the same time, it led to Doctor-Pingel either not being taken seriously as a woman or having to prove her point vigorously. But with life and work experiences gained, she felt more empowered and was soon treated as an equal. After returning from Germany in 1995, Doctor-Pingel set up her own practice while sharing the office space with Pingel for 13 years. Pingel, a major influence on her, accepted her need for her own identity. Later, in 2008 she designed and built her own office near her home, which gave her an immense amount of freedom and concentration and helped her to be open to new opportunities.

Doctor-Pingel likes to take small steps and focuses within herself for inspiration. She began by designing residences and low-budget schools. The early projects were hands-on jobs that required her to be the supervisor, contractor, architect, structural engineer as well as interior and landscape designer all at the same time. This set the foundation for all her future projects. She began

The recent two-year term at L'Avenir d'Auroville (Auroville's planning and development body) has once again brought forth to her the difficulty of planning a city that is constantly in a flux without the external pressures of commercial interests. Having no detailed guidelines or by-laws and no legal monitoring systems, Auroville's planning is a huge challenge. In future she sees a great scope in exploring the equation between man-nature-economy and combining the three aspects of reason, ethics and aesthetics in an approach to life and architecture.

Mona Doctor-Pingel projects

Cottage Restaurant, Pondicherry, 2006–9

Designed for the Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust in Pondicherry, Cottage Restaurant is situated on a prime location on the main canal of the old city. The restaurant, started by The Mother in 1954, is interwoven with the fabric of the ashramites' life through memories and emotions. The building was reinvented through continuity of the intangibles while the tangible, the built envelop, is fresh and contemporary.

The design is simple with an understated elegance that does not call for attention. It strives for beauty in cleanliness while creating an ambience similar to the old Cottage Restaurant. It has inward-looking spaces, created by courtyards with a dry landscape, while saving an existing neem

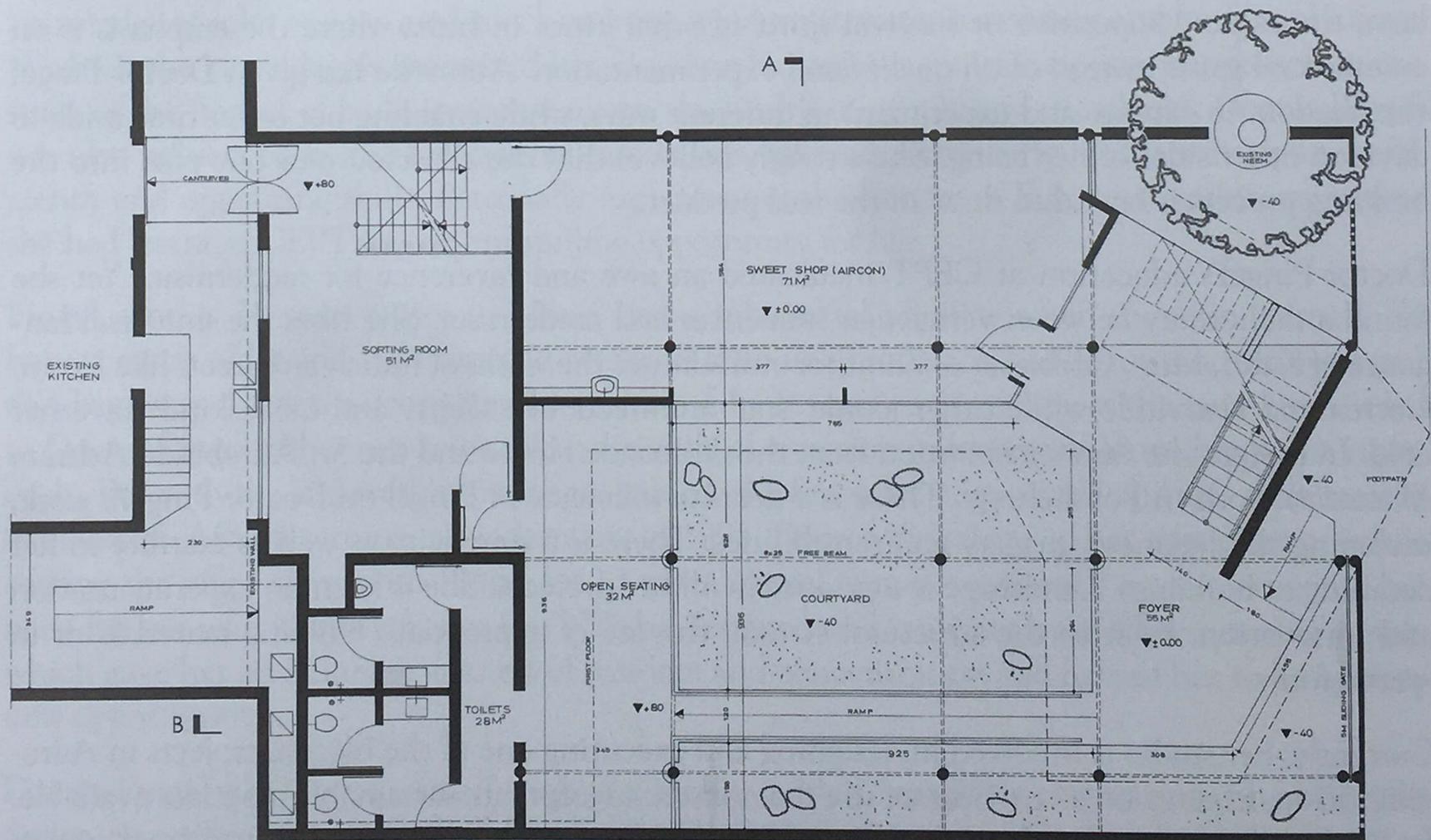


Plate 31.2 Cottage Restaurant, plan
Drawing courtesy of Mona Doctor-Pingel