

The challenges of experimenting in Auroville

We are fond of quoting Mother when she writes that Auroville will be a place for making experiments. But how easy is it to innovate in the Auroville of today?

It's not always easy, according to the experience of one Auroville architect. Mona, who has been living and practicing in Auroville for about 25 years, is trying to launch a project in the Industrial Zone called UTSAV ('Celebration'). But in a new way. Usually, Auroville architects do not initiate projects. Normally they are approached by a project holder who already has funding and an idea of what they want. The architect then comes up with a concept that meets these needs in terms of the available budget as well as satisfying the larger parameters of town planning in Auroville.

However, UTSAV was Mona's own initiative. "Other architects told me I was very brave to do it like this because I was risking putting in a lot of work without any guarantee of success, but it was an inner response, something close to my heart".

Mona noticed that there were a lot of projects, particularly in regard to housing, happening in other parts of Auroville but not much was happening in the Industrial Zone where she lived and where the new Verite radial road is located. She wanted to propose a development on a small strip of land along this radial.

"The idea was to provide office space for units that were starting up, particularly those run by young people, as well as services, so I designed UTSAV in such a way that there are several small units with the flexibility to merge them. At the same time, I wanted to provide an urban insert on the road with a colonnade running all along it to bring a sense of 'city' architecture." She didn't want to create a 'dead zone' outside office hours, so she also decided to incorporate accommodation on the upper floors for volunteers, a crying need in Auroville at present.

The first step was to get feedback on the concept from the neighbours. As Mona puts it, "Here in Auroville we don't have bylaws; instead we have neighbours who are our biggest bylaws!" She received varied responses but in the end she felt she had received a call, "so I just responded to that".

Mona drew up a scheme for ten office units with accommodation above, and presented it to L'Avenir d'Auroville, the Auroville planning office. L'Avenir provided initial site permission and asked her to come back with more detailed drawings. When she returned with these, they were peer reviewed by six other architects.

"They gave some really good inputs and I adjusted the design to what they suggested. Then they gave me the green signal to go ahead to the next level, which meant engaging a structural engineer and working out all the fine details, including a Bill of Quantities and detailed costing." Recently she gave the final building application to them: "it's 120 pages long because I had to answer all their questions properly and provide the substantiating documents."

Mona worked on a very tight budget, "no fancy experiments", and initially decided to construct only half the number of offices and accommodation originally approved by L'Avenir. While the eventual cost would be around 2.5 crore rupees, she estimated she could start with 70 lakhs, and the raw structure could

be completed for one crore rupees.

But how to fund it? As it was her project, she had to become the fund raiser, something for which she had no prior experience.

The most common sources of funding for Auroville projects are either Government of India grants for institutional buildings like schools, commercial unit funds when they want to fund their expansion or individuals' private money when it comes to housing or start-ups. It is not possible to get loans from Indian banks because no collateral can be offered – all Auroville assets are owned by the Foundation – while the Financial Service only provides limited loans subject to certain conditions.

At first, things looked promising for Mona. She had many enquiries and one of the first units interested said they would take the whole building. They planned to fundraise for the construction and then rent it out. But this never materialized.

Then Youthlink became interested. "It was perfect for them and the neighbours were very supportive. We presented the concept to the Governing Board in February and suddenly there was a possibility that the Government of India would fund it." However, this also didn't materialise.

Then Mona approached a few of our big commercial units. "One of them told me that all business is run on borrowed money. They don't give loans because they are always in debt." Another unit which already gives a big monthly contribution to the Financial Service said they don't fund individual projects, partly because if they give a specified donation they still have to contribute an extra 33% on top.

However, even if she did succeed in getting a loan, Mona was not sure how it could be repaid. "A standard loan from a bank has to be repaid with 7-8% interest. This would mean that each unit in UTSAV would need to pay a minimum rent of Rs 8,000 a month, in addition to paying for running costs. But we also wanted to provide space for small start-ups and services like haircutting, and they definitely cannot afford this.

"It's a contradiction. On the one hand we want services that are free but we are not giving any support to those who want to provide this, nor to young entrepreneurs who are starting out. It is so sad. We've brought them up with this idealism to serve the community but we are reproducing a very old economic system in Auroville which is making this almost impossible."

So what is the solution?

Mona points out that the Financial Service has something like 60 crore rupees in cash reserves. "Even if we use only one third of that,



Rear/courtyard view

it would help projects like this get off the ground and give a boost to our services and young entrepreneurs. And the Auroville Board of Commerce should set up something that helps facilitate and 'land' a project like this, just like the Housing Service does for new housing projects. I know it was my own initiative but, still, I feel that I could have been given much more help."

Meanwhile, Mona is hoping that enough individuals come forward to fund the UTSAV project. Now she has 92 lakhs in hand from people who have already committed to purchasing six units from the total of 15 units. She mentions that, as a rule of thumb, once you have 50% booked, the other 50% will come. "So I'm still hopeful."

But finding funding was only one of the challenges she faced. She was also told by L'Avenir that an architect cannot be a project holder, so she had to find somebody else. "I understand they have had bad experiences in the past with architects being project holders, but this is my vision, this is my baby. So why should anyone else be interested in carrying it?"

"The whole project has been like this, one blockage after another. But I decided I would learn from everything that comes and flow with it. So I asked many people, but they all declined because it's a big responsibility to be a project holder. Finally, I asked Auromics Bobby who is interested to see this area develop, and she agreed. She is a good person for this because she's very grounded and knows about the practical side of running a business.

"Now I have to register a unit under Auromics Trust. Then the unit will need three executives...it never stops. The lesson seems to be that if you choose to experiment in Auroville, you do so at your own risk and cost."

The 'cost' so far for Mona, apart from the continual challenges and frustration, has been considerable. She has put two years of work into the project for which she hasn't received a paisa.

In fact, the project has already cost her seven lakhs. "I can manage and it was my choice, but the worst part is that the structural engineer, a very nice gentleman who is not an Aurovilian, has not been paid for all his considerable work on the project."

Is it easier, then, for an Auroville architect to work on projects outside Auroville?

"In some ways, yes. Outside, the client contacts you, you are given your plot and some guidelines and as long as you follow the bylaws it's over; nobody can say anything. Here you have to consult the neighbours, only one of whom can veto your project. There are also lobbies, politics, interpersonal issues, all these complicate things in Auroville. Look what the Kalpana project had to go through. There was blockage after blockage. It took more than seven years to realise that project even though there was funding from the beginning. So I think the main blockages here are the neighbours, the politics and the money."

Does she regret having started this experiment?

"Not at all. I still feel the idea is valid and, after all, this is why we run architect offices in Auroville, to realize something different. And now that the project is almost ready to take off, I am excited to see how it unfolds. I knew I was going to be a guinea-pig but I have learned so much." For example, she points out that architects are trained in their schools to feel special, superior. "We look down on the developers because they are doing commercial work and we say we are not commercial: we are 'artists-cum-technical visionaries' who stick to our values. But for this project I've had to become a kind of developer as well as a fund-raiser, something many architects never have to get involved with, and now I appreciate much better the challenges that architects who work with developers and fund-raisers have to face."