Mona Doctor-Pingel
STUDIO NAQISHBANDI

When Mona Doctor-Pingel started practising architecture in 1995, her ambition was to simply design and execute “healthy” buildings based on the principles of Building Biology — her Master’s thesis at the University of Flensburg, Germany (1992-94). She recounts being fortunate enough to design residential projects for clients who were open to her experimental ideas — only naturally ventilated buildings (with just 12-volt table fans); a minimum use of concrete; solar PV for electricity; solar water heaters; landscaping using indigenous and water-resistant plants; and designing around the existing trees on the site. She stresses that sustainability has to be a way of life and “not just one more word added to (enhance) the salability (quotient) of a project.”

Her idealist aspirations proved to be a fertile ground for new learnings — and she was open to the idea of course correction. “I learnt that earth blocks have other inherent problems. For example, an ant or termite infestation in the mortar joints which are not compressed by machine, or (a chance that) cracks (may develop in the façades) due to uneven settlement. Besides, building with mud is not necessarily cheaper. If you don’t have good quality soil, it is better not to opt for mud construction,” says the CEPT alumnus, adding that in the initial days she ended by educating clients. “I have always seen my work in Auroville as a response to a deeper aspiration (sometimes not even consciously formulated) and therefore, any kind of work that came to the studio — from designing a chair, landscape, small extensions or bigger planning projects — was seen as a stepping stone to inner and outer growth.”

Her work can be described as sensorial, rustic and handcrafted, with respect for local context and climate at its core. Through the years, her design philosophy has focused on innovation and experimentation. She adopts an uncompromising approach to quality, working on interiors, landscape and architecture in tandem, creating buildings that are rich in detail but not ostentatious, simple but not austere. There has also been a certain evolution in her approach: “My idea that the architect is the conductor of an orchestra has undergone a major change.”

Doctor-Pingel is keen on achieving a building solution that is cost-effective, affordable and yet rich in aesthetics. She is also passionate about the state of education in India and is involved in several educational and training programs that address crucial issues affecting the current state of architecture. Her advice to fresh graduates is to work with a firm of choice for at least two to three years, so as to get a good hands-on experience of the profession. For other architects? “Don’t get stuck in boxes.”

LOOKING BACK
Instead of identifying one of her best projects as impactful on the firm, Doctor-Pingel says that if she has to recount her projects that truly impacted her thinking, it would be the buildings that have not been built, even after a lot of investment of time, passion and research.

LOOKING FORWARD
The resurrection of the Auroville Integral Life Centre, part of the Auro University in Pondicherry, has been on the cards for the past five years, but will finally take off now. “Working hard for this and trying to achieve the same level of detailing and perfection will be a huge challenge,” she says.