Creativity Unbound

AR. MONA DOCTOR PINGEL

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Architecture & Conscious Usage of Natural Resources

Ar. Mona Doctor Pingel, Principal Architect, Studio Naqshbandi, Auroville

“Sustainability is a way of life and not an add-on,” reiterates Ar. Mona Doctor Pingel during an unplugged interview with Built Constructions. While she visited Bangalore recently to deliver ‘Architecture of the Senses’, Ar. Mona unwinds herself on an architectural journey in Auroville and her involvement in various planning bodies of Auroville.

“For me, architecture is a way of life. Sustainability is something that you have to take in your hands instead of passing the buck on to others. Sustainability is nothing but conscious usage of natural resources,” she states.

Auroville is a place in Tamil Nadu where interesting architectural research and experimentation is being carried out. Auroville was founded an International Township for Human Unity in 1968 by Mirra Alfassa, “The Mother”, who believed that “man is a transitional being”. Mother expected that this experimental “universal township” would contribute significantly in the “progress of humanity towards its splendid future by bringing together people of goodwill and aspiration for a better world. Auroville has attracted a lot of architects, both from India and abroad, who have shown a new direction to architecture in India. A lot of experimentation and research have been carried out in the use of building materials, alternate materials, sustainable building technologies and ecologically sensitive development and energy systems right from its inception, before ‘sustainable’ became a focus for the world and before ‘green’ became a fashion statement. Mona is a freelance architect in Auroville, who has a small independent set-up, Studio Naqshbandi, where she tries out appropriate building technologies using local materials and craftsmen with an emphasis on client interaction. Her work centres on one of the main guiding principles of creating buildings that are healthy and involves elements such as electromagnetic fields, use of natural elements and earth energies. Her project, Yantra is a testimony to that.

Profession and Life Integrates at Auroville

She is an Aurovillian for the last 25 years, working under The Auroville Foundation. “For an outsider, it may be another city that is coming up. But for us, it’s an adventure and a...”
process that is transformative at all levels. The teachings of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother govern our life giving impetus to our holistic development. Life and work need not be two separate integers to differentiate. A profession must allow different aspects of your being to come to the fore and flower instead of centring on one. Ordinarily, people tend to compartmentalise their life, for instance, they wait for weekends to enjoy and relax. Your work, if it is your passion, is a joy as well, and should be able to constantly rejuvenate and nourish you. In Auroville all parts, of your being mental, vital and physical and psychic should ideally get equal importance and be balanced.”

“It’s an international city one needs. To break boundaries that allow us to look at ourselves deeply. I feel fortunate and privileged to live in Auroville. The physical infrastructure has changed drastically from the earlier days where there were few trees and a barren plateau with heat and dust storms. Thanks to people who settled in the beginning and planted thousands of trees, now it’s a forest,” she beams.

Each and every work you accomplish or every building that you design is a reflection of your own self and you can tell everything about the architect by studying the building, if it has been done sincerely. She chuckles and adds, “In Auroville it’s very clear, you can study each architect’s design. You can make out the kind of phase of life they are in, their aspirations and the kind of inner workings they are into because each one is working with themselves.”

'Architecture of the Senses'
A healthy building should be the way of architecture. Normally, aesthetics in architecture focuses on the mere form of the building. When you make a building functional, its motive is achieved. “There is an interesting diagram that I talk about based on Sri Aurobindo’s teachings. The diagram

in the form of an equilateral triangle demonstrates reason, ethics and aesthetics that have to be balanced in anything that we do in life. If any one aspect gets over emphasised, imbalance takes place. For instance, in architecture you need not avail yourself all the materials you come across just because they are functional. Materials like plastic, metals and glass have been overused. I agree they are considered to be practical and functional, easy and clean. But the irony is that it’s not natural anymore and hence, usage of those materials has lost the balance. In Auroville, we have freedom to keep up some of these values thereby giving attention to small details,” she adds.

Landscaping is a vital expansion of the whole building design and it helps the building to integrate well with its surroundings and natural setting. Landscaping is an integral part of Ar. Mona’s work since many years. “I feel landscaping is like a raisin on the cake in a project. It makes a building sit in its surroundings and land on the earth. In all our designs, landscaping inbuilt into it and it’s not an add-on,” she comments.

Baubiology
Ar. Mona brings in expertise in Building Biology (Baubiology), a holistic science that leads to natural healthy ecological homes, schools, and workplaces that exist in harmony with the planetary environment. It is a field of building science investigating the indoor living environment for a variety of irritants. Practitioners believe the environment of residential, commercial and public buildings can affect the health of the occupants, producing a restful or stressful environment. Important areas of building biology are building materials and processes, electromagnetic fields, radiation and indoor air quality.

Further Impetus to Career
Apart from establishing architectural career and adopting a tranquil lifestyle, Auroville was the place for Ar. Mona to find her life partner too—
Poppo (Reinhold) Pingel. Poppo Pingel is from Germany, who is associated with Auroville ever since 1970 and his architectural contribution to this highly acclaimed place is enormous. He brings in highly personal approach and with a rustic quality while responding to the climate, landscape and culture of the place in his works.

"In 1987, I arrived for NASA at Chennai to approach Ar. Laurie Baker for my internship during my five year course on architecture from CEPT University. However, he was unwilling to take any trainees at that point in time. He recommended me to work with architect Poppo Pingel in Auroville and that's how Auroville grew on me. For my diploma Thesis, I came back to Auroville to do research on Matrimandir. Poppo was a big influence on my work as we did couple of projects together and that was the best training ever I got. After finishing these two projects, I travelled to Germany to pursue my masters in Appropriate Technology and on returning started my own independent practice in Auroville.

Dedication to Sustainability
She recalls, "In the initial years, I had to struggle to establish my own identity and the education at CEPT has really helped me. I learnt that I can't do things just because somebody else does it.

At Naqshbandi, she experiments and explores the many facets of architecture, interior designs and landscapes. Being in a non-commercial set-up as in Auroville, has given her the freedom to explore and experiment in different ways. She strongly believes that the consciousness one puts into the design and building process is bound to show in the end product.

Ar. Mona is also currently involved in research in Energy Efficiency in Buildings, as part of a five year INDO-US joint research programme - CBERD (Centre for Building Energy Research and Development). She is the expert on Naturally Ventilated buildings in hot-humid region within the framework of this research which includes professors and scientists from premier institutions in India: CEPT- Ahmadabad, IIT-Ahmadabad; IIT-Mumbai; MNIT-Jaipur and IIT-Hyderabad, in partnership with LBNL, Berkeley, Carnegie Mellon University, Oak Ridge National Labs, Tennessee, and Rensselaer Polytechnic, NY in the USA. "The main focus of CBERD initiative is to promote innovation in energy efficiency through collaborative research, contributing to significant reduction in energy use in both nations. This will also focus on the integration of information technology with building controls and physical systems for commercial and high-rise residential buildings. It's all about software tools, setting up high-end labs, day lighting, efficient HVAC systems, etc. My role is to study the passive design strategies for naturally ventilated buildings. In Auroville, we have taken up seven buildings to work on and have collected detailed information through hourly data logging with digital loggers," she informs. The outcome-based R&D will result in significant energy savings by driving development of cost-effective technologies and their implementation, especially in the commercial sector. It is a Rs. 22 crore project spread over five years.

She has been actively involved in different planning bodies of Auroville. Before a few years she has initiated a
series of Monographs on Auroville Architects and is the author of the first of these monographs on the pioneering architects—Poppo Pingel, which has been released in 2012 at CEPT, Ahmadabad, published internationally by MAPIN Publishing house.

‘Dream Catchers’
She has also been a core group member of the Dreamcatchers, a forum for envisioning and participatory city planning. She has been a member of L’Avenir d’Auroville, Auroville’s Town Planning and Development Group. We are always experimenting on how to plan Auroville. She adds, “Auroville gives immense freedom for creativity. The basic motive in dreamcatching was trying to find in teamwork the highest common factor rather than the lowest common denominator. Generally, in teamwork, everybody compromises to get the harmony. Through Dream Catchers, we promote to get people’s highest aspirations together and manifest more than what each one could have manifested.

Conclusion
The purpose of Auroville is to realise human unity. Auroville was developed from nothing so we have developed all the skills in-house and most importantly inculcated a sense of pride in the work that we do. In Auroville ideally everything happens by consensus. Such idealism has allowed people living there to be multi-faceted and sharpen themselves holistically. In ancient times, Indians believed that any kind of art including dance, paint, sculptures was an offering to the higher entity or self. “I think we have to get back this idealism into our work such as architecture. This in turn will get reflected into buildings. Everything should have certain amount of beauty and integrity. Living in Auroville has allowed me the confidence to live on any platform. The collective does not allow you to hide yourself. The faster you take off your layers, the easier you can grow. All the traditions and methods that we once followed in ancient times are very relevant even now. As architects, we can bring forth those traditions through our designs while integrating with the modern paradigms and way of life,” she adds as a concluding note.

Vinutha V

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