The uncertainty and the decision

‘Yeah okay, chal bye Sam! I hang up the phone both angry and depressed as I was informed that the study tour to Auroville has been cancelled because of ‘Cyclone Neelam’ which had shown its ugly face in Andhra and Tamil Nadu. It was a bad start to an otherwise good day when I felt the winter chill in the morning, a rare thing in Mumbai. I sulked throughout the day and I wondered how Al Gore is so right about global warming and cyclones.

My friends had always told me that Auroville is a place worth visiting and I wondered why so? I had this vague image of Auroville in my mind along with some misconceptions as well. So I had always wanted to discover it for myself. Perhaps that is one of the reasons why I was so disappointed. The second reason was the proximity of Auroville to Pondicherry (Puducherry, which I found out later), a union territory with a French colonial history which promised of a blue sea, good food, cheap beer and good times with friends. The evening that followed was almost a busy conference between us and at midnight we decided to take a shot and go to Chennai and check out ‘Neelam’ for ourselves. The unease in me had settled down and I was both happy and proud at my classmates. I could almost see the sun even at midnight and the winter chill next morning made sense again. A decision well taken - at last.

To Chennai

The train journey to Chennai was a rewind of all the study trips that I had and I wondered how we can be kids at any point of our lives. Study trips are also the time when you find the composition and chemistry that make friends become good friends and that’s what happened.

Visit to FLSmidth

The first image of FLSmidth complex was a white mass behind some coconut trees which at first impression, I found a bit boring, but it did give way to an image of a corporate building. The green garden distracted me and I almost thought about the scientific name of the coconut tree which I failed miserably. I also failed to find the main entrance of the building as we waited to make our pass. The way to the entrance has a series of stones of different textures followed by synthetic mats which takes away the dirt of the shoes at each stage before you enter the building. An interesting thought indeed and I suddenly began to perceive the building in a different way. The LEED certified emblem installed at entrance spoke about its sustainable history.

The entrance led to a triple storied atrium dividing the building into two halves. A central straight staircase runs through the atrium almost like an arrow connecting all the floors. I stood there and admired the detail of the staircase when the skylight on top of the staircase caught my attention. The skylight flooded the centre of the building with ample diffused daylight and the white walls enhanced the effect. Our guide told us that the staircase lobby served as a congregation space for the staff whenever the administration

The central staircase lobby flooded with diffused skylight enhanced by white walls served as congregation space for staff (RMT)

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wanted to deliver a message. There was a presentation followed by a brief visit to the terrace where they had applied high Albedo paint to increase heat reflection. But there was no evidence of that paint whatsoever, thanks to Neelam again.

The visit to the water purification plant was unique as we got a chance to see water purification by RO and UV methods, something we don’t see so often. The process of waste segregation was quite simple and it made me wonder why such simple things are not done everywhere.

**Visit to Dakshinchitra**

Dakshinchitra was fun and educational too. Fun because it provided a lot of places where you can get yourself photographed and educational because you can see almost all the forms and splendor of south Indian architecture. Add to it the traditional art and crafts of South India, experienced firsthand. After doing a crash course on ‘patachita’ from a local artist, I understood the fun as well as the pain in doing and selling them. I bought a few pieces, but didn’t bargain.

After Dakshinchitra and a brief lunch we finally headed to Auroville.

On the way, I saw the new RCC and brick structures and I wondered how a rich architectural tradition of south India has been confined to a place like Dakshinchitra which now serves almost like a museum. Architecture needs to evolve with time and I pondered upon the application of traditional architecture with respect to current needs and context. I thought perhaps Auroville could provide some answers to my questions. These thoughts kept me busy for a while when I could hear someone sing again and fun time continued thereafter.

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shouted 'Hey, Matrumandir!' It was then that I realized that we had finally reached Auroville. Perhaps someone had intentionally placed Matrumandir there so that it is the first glimpse when one arrives in Auroville. We got down at the Mitra hostel which was to become our stay for six good days. I selected and dusted a spot on the terrace to lie down in and gazed straight at the stars, something which I was witnessing after a long long time. It was almost like meeting an old friend.

Episode at CSR (Centre for Scientific Research, Auroville)

The CSR experience was unique as we were learning something without actually studying. Along with the learning I was actually unlearning a lot of things. In between the learning and unlearning, I had some interesting moments too. For example, I could easily find out who had talked till late in the morning by looking at the drooping eyes and dropping pens which in turn would follow by an extra cup of tea during the break.

The presentation on ‘Town Planning and Water Management’ by Gilles Boulicot was quite interesting. I was trying really hard to understand his French accent; I would fail at every third word. But all the presentation gave me a new perspective and an alternate way of life. Each presentation was an attempt to understand and simplify designs to its basic form. I understood how important it is to study the nature of any problem before actually trying to solve it. Any problem can be fully understood only when one experiences it and its solution can be found only when one experiments with it.

The knowledge that had been shared through the presentations was what proved to be successful, but they had been achieved only through a lot failures. The on-site installations of ferro-cement structures and natural water purification systems gave us ample knowledge of how system and aesthetics can be merged to optimize design. Perhaps the best lesson that I learned from CSR is the art of learning itself.

The presentation on the construction of Matrumandir also taught a lot of things. It was quite interesting to find how spirituality guided its form, how the form guided the structure and how holistically the whole project was perceived and executed.
The Matrumandir experience

The presentation on Matrumandir had created a lot of excitement among us. Perhaps that was the reason why we all were at the gates of Matrumandir before time. The interiors of the lower chamber and the ramp looked familiar and the evilness in me couldn’t stop comparing it to scenes from ‘Star Trek’.

The silent walk through the ramp towards the upper chamber gave me a sense of elevation and the silence slowly crept in so much so that by the time I was inside the chamber, I was still and calm. I had never experienced that silence before. As I sat on the mat to meditate, I could hear my own heartbeat and feel the chaos in my mind. I thought that silence too can be disturbing sometimes or perhaps I’m too used to chaos. But that state got over soon as I could make peace with the silence around me after a few moments. I began to admire the changing width and intensity of the reflected light on the crystal.

Conclusion and Confusion

Now that I had finally discovered and experienced Auroville, I understood that Auroville is an experiment in process. It has its own successes and failures. It is perhaps the only city in the world with the basic idea of human unity and harmony. But the very basic idea behind the creation of Auroville is put to test when it interacts with the villages outside.

It is very difficult to be a member of Auroville mainly because Auroville expects its members to understand the very idea behind it so that they can be active in their participation and committed to the cause. Moreover on a practical note, sustaining oneself in Auroville through the ‘guest period’ and the ‘new comer period’ is quite difficult.

The Auroville experience taught me that the clash of various factors of sustainability such as social, environment and economic can be harmonized when we bring in the element of spirituality.

“We found aspects related to construction techniques very interesting... Exposure to Stabilized Earth blocks (SEB) techniques with presentation on vaults and domes added immense knowledge... their importance in present context is universal and helps in adding great value to use of local materials.”

- Ar. Sunil Jadhav, Student, Semester I, M. Arch. (Environmental Architecture), Rachana Sansad