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UTSAV, a mixed use experimental building complex

In November 2019, *Auroville Today* introduced UTSAV (meaning 'Celebration'), a combined commercial and residential project which aimed to bring new energy on a major Radial of the Industrial Zone. Now that phase 1A has been completed, *Auroville Today* talked to Mona, the architect who initiated and supervised the project. What have been the challenges? How successfully have the original objectives been fulfilled, and if there have been changes, what are they and why were they made? And what has she learned from the process?

Auroville Today: In our 2019 interview you listed some of the initial challenges you faced. As an architect you had chosen to initiate the project, which is not what normally happens, and then you had to get building permission, go for a lengthy tender process, raise the finance, find a project holder and register UTSAV under an Auroville Trust which would take responsibility for the project. And all this before you had even started construction.

Mona: Yes. But we did get building permission, Auromics Trust agreed to be our umbrella organisation, Bobby agreed to be the Project Holder and we had two or three bookings and big hopes! But before we could finally start construction, Covid struck, and this slowed everything down. Finally, we could start only in September 2020. We had many challenges to finish the project, including those who booked not paying up in time, not enough bookings to keep the project running and the Ukraine War with prices rising. Then there was the ruling of the National Green Tribunal which stopped all city construction, and other additional blockages from the Town Development Council. But every time I would appeal to The Mother and she would give me just a little bit of hope, a little more money from somewhere, and with a lot of goodwill from the contractor, Nalla Builders (Baskar) and support from the Project Holder (Bobby), we managed to keep afloat. All this explains why it took us about 3 years to complete the first phase. Finally in November 2023 the first units were ready. So a project initiated in 2017 got completed in 2023!

The original idea was to have commercial units on the ground and first floor with accommodation for volunteers in the apartments above, and one of your hopes was that the units would attract Auroville startups / young entrepreneurs. How did that work out?

My original idea was to have young people's commercial start-ups, which is why I designed small spaces, but I realised it's impossible for young people to afford these places. Even if they could manage to get a 10.5 lakh loan for our cheapest unit, the interest payment would be just too much for them. So we have only managed to accommodate one start-up, and he is still having difficulty in making the final payment.

The volunteers' accommodation idea also changed. I approached Savi, which looks after volunteers, to finance some units on the second floor, but that didn't work out, then I hoped that YouthLink would be interested but that didn't materialise either. Originally, I designed very simple accommodation with shared bathrooms, but people told me that nobody wants to share bathrooms these days. So in the end I decided to make apartments because I thought these are always needed. But these were not taken immediately either, as nobody could afford the cost, 35 or 40 lakhs, of a two-bedroom apartment. Many wanted ground floor apartments with small gardens! In November 2022 the situation became very difficult because many of the units had not been taken and we didn't have the money to finish the construction.

Was there a tipping point when you found enough people to finance the project?

It was difficult until January 2023 when Akash and Monica came in with Cynergy and The Sprout café (they had been looking for the "right" place for 6 years). They took five units, and soon after Aurelio took the entire top floor for Svaram Atelier research and therapy section. On the ground floor now there will be two cafés (a Naturellement outlet will open soon), and two garment outlets: Colours of Nature and Lively Boutique. On the first floor there is Kalya (Progress landscapes), Cynergy and Sarvam Computers (Bala), and Svaram Atelier is above.



Roadside view of UTSAV

The 'L' part of the building, at the rear of the building, has residences on all three floors.

Is it challenging to have a mix of accommodation and commercial units in one building?

Very! It's complicated because people who are living there want some privacy and don't want noise at night, but the people who are making money either want as many people as possible to come, and/or to stay open long hours. So we have an agreement that the cafés and offices should not be open after nine in the evening. At one point, one of the cafés wanted to put their tables in a corridor, but I had to say no as that area is for circulation and is paid for by everybody. Also the inner courtyard has been kept open for collective activities / events like food pop-ups, open exhibitions, film screenings or music concerts.

There were also complications with accounting because Auroville does not have a structure for a mixed usage project like this. So, everybody's commercial project payments had to go through their unit, while for accommodation the money went through Housing.

What were your most important learnings?

One is that Auroville needs to create a framework that allows mixed-use buildings to come up. We don't have such a framework yet, which is why we got sandwiched between Housing and FAMC.

Then, at one point I realised I was no longer just an architect who was also doing project management. I had additionally become a de facto developer who had to 'sell' the project to potential buyers. It cost me much time, headaches and here I made all sorts of mistakes. I learned that developers normally have a large share of the money upfront before they attempt to start construction. If you don't have that and you're relying upon selling units to be able to start and continue constructing, it is an extremely difficult situation. Also I wanted to be very open with everybody about the costs and how I had arrived at a certain price: I kept perfect accounts of everything. But a developer from Ahmedabad told me that developers never do this: they never show their costings to any of their clients. In fact, normally neighbours will never know who paid what because each case is individually negotiated!

In the beginning it didn't matter, but when costs escalated towards the end by approximately 12%, people wanted to know how I had calculated certain things. Luckily I had kept clear accounts. I told them that the original agreement I had made with them was that this was a 'no profit, no loss' project and, over the time it took to complete it, of course there were cost overruns in

materials and labour, so these had to be shared. In fact, materials were bought under the UTSAV GST number and labour was sourced by Nalla Builders, so that helped to keep the costs down, but it meant a lot more work for my Studio.

In the end, UTSAV phase 1A cost 3.6 crores, which is about Rs 3,500 / square foot. It is not the cheapest, but it includes everything – the common areas, overhead and underground tanks, the biological wastewater treatment, covered garage, a generous entrance foyer, payments made to L'Avenir (without which we would not have got permission to start), water connection, a huge open parking area with some landscaping and quality construction, etc. – so I think it is still reasonable.

Then again, we gave everybody the possibility for air-conditioning. I learned this from other communities where AC was not designed for, because I feel that you cannot impose mental concepts, however well-intentioned, on people because life is not like that: we all change.

Another thing I learned was the need for extreme flexibility – not only in the design but also in my mind! So many things happen that are not planned and you have to be ready to adjust. It was good that I did a frame and modular construction for the building because when my original idea for small units or volunteer rooms didn't work out, I could easily modify internal spaces according to demand, while retaining the external façade.

At the same time, you can't be too flexible; sometimes you have to hold the line. For example, one of the unit managers wanted to put steel rolling shutters on the ground floor instead of the grills I had planned for security, but I told him that is not possible as I didn't want UTSAV to look like a dead city complex at night. Everyone made efforts and we found some harmonious solutions to individual problems. It is not as perfect as I would like it to be, but one can learn to live with that!

Overall, I think we managed quite well to do what we intended to do. My initial reference images in the project brochure show Connaught Place in New Delhi and European roadside cafés as inspirations to bring some "urban" character to the Radial. With the double height covered passage and the outdoor café sit-outs of The Sprout and the soon to open Bella Vita (Naturellement outlet), UTSAV will get a character that is urban and welcoming.

Will there be another phase?

Phase 1B will come, and this will be taken up by Miniature, the Italian designer clothing unit. But this time it should be much easier for me as I will only be dealing with one client.

Would you do a project like this again?

No, because I've made my learnings, which I am happy to share with others willing to try something like this out, although it will never be the same. I felt inspired to do this, and if things come to me, I think they are meant for my inner and outer growth.

From a conversation with Alan



Mona

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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."

Alan

PASSINGS

Sundharamurthy Murugesan family

It was a profound shock for the community when it was announced that four bodies of one family – Sundar (Sundharamurthy Murugesan, 40 years old), his wife Mahesh (Maheshwari (35)) and their two daughters Kirthiga (17) and Samichsha (13) – had been discovered in their house in Auromodele on 17th November. While the reason behind the deaths remains unclear, it was reported that the parents were experiencing severe financial difficulties.

Sundar originally came from KUILPALAYAM and Mahesh from PERIYAMUDALIARCHAVADY. Both attended Auroville schools. Sundar's main work was with the Dental Clinic, where he worked as technician, general assistant and handyman. Mahesh had worked for more than 20 years at the Solar Kitchen. Their daughters, Kirthiga and Samichsha, were attending New Era Secondary School.

On the late afternoon of 18 October, the four bodies were buried at Auroville's funeral grounds near Adventure with many people attending. On Thursday 24th a meditation in memory of the family took place around the Peace Table in the Unity Pavilion. Now there is an urgent need for the community to reflect deeply upon and learn from this tragic loss.



Nilesh Nisar

Nilesh Premji Nisar, of Arc-en-Ciel community, passed away on Tuesday, 5th November, at the Kidney Centre in Pondicherry. He was 49. He had suffered from weak kidneys for some time and had needed frequent dialysis treatment.

Hailing from Bombay, Nilesh, Geeta his wife and their young son, Aditya, arrived in Auroville in 2000. He had a clear penchant for business and started working in a number of places, including Upasana and Naturellement. Later the couple developed the 'Natraj' unit, which developed a reputation with food connoisseurs and conscious consumers for high-quality food products. He also supported Auroville's commercial units in discovering new markets and retail outlets across India.

His remains were cremated at Auroville's Cremation Grounds near Adventure on the afternoon of the 6th November.

