

“Those at the centre have to give guidance”

Helmut is a senior Aurovilian architect with an interest in town planning.

“There has been a problem with planning ever since I came to Auroville over thirty years ago,” says Helmut. But why? And what exactly is the problem?

“According to my training and active experience the role of the Chief Town Planner is to create the structure to ensure a proper development of the township and guide the work of all collaborators. That didn’t happen; Roger obviously defined his role differently. I think he considered himself foremost a designer of forms, sculpted objects and pleasing interiors – I admire him for his outstanding capacity for it – whereas, in my view, town planning needs a completely different approach. It is more the design of a process, the manifestation of an “anchoring course of logic” (as Louis Kahn put it) for future development, making it as easy as possible for future architects to follow and coming generations to comply with.

“If this work has not been done, it is rather naïve to expect the Galaxy Plan to come up by itself. Actually, it is the surest way to prevent it. Since it is quite an unusual, highly innovative and complicated concept (compared to, say, the “gridiron plan” of Pondicherry), people have no clue as how to accomplish it.”

Helmut continues: “We find a good example if we look at a plan of the present housing development of Sector 2 in the Residential Zone. There is obviously no readable overall concept for the upcoming houses. The absence of guidelines has more or less forced the architects to place their buildings at random.



Helmut

Architects need a coordination agency and information on how to relate to the Galaxy plan. This would include information on the envisaged mobility system (since the street – and not the building – is the forerunner of development); on water, water conservation, energy; on building types and building heights, on scale and use of the spaces between the buildings and their landscaping; on pre-

ferred materials and colour in order to achieve an overall harmony etc. All this should have been properly laid down in a plan and building manual before inviting architects to come up with individual house designs, but this didn’t happen.

“To compile, define and consciously integrate all this information for all the zones of Auroville, to make it presentable to a wider audience, to synthe-

size and arrive at decisions is a tremendous amount of work. It cannot be achieved solely on a committee level. Though seminars and participatory sessions like the work of the *Dreamcatchers* provide excellent ideas, they quickly vanish into the drawers of oblivion if they don’t find a proper receptacle in the work of a firmly established planning department able to process them and to provide a counterpart and coordinating body for any outside input. To build up this structure in the form of a permanently team of professionals is the mandate of *L’Avenir* as I understand it. But till today it is absent.”

But how is this basic information arrived at?

Helmut describes the typical planning process. “It always starts by documenting what is already there – the topography, climate, existing buildings, water situation etc. Then there is a proper analysis of what the situation suggests, of the possibilities and constraints. Next we have to ask ourselves “What do we actually want, what is our vision?” leading us to formulate aims and objectives (and maybe lists of possible means to achieve them, much in the way the *Dreamcatchers* do it). Auroville’s aims and objectives may include ecology, sustainability, aesthetic appearance, the materialisation of the Galaxy plan and the target aim of 50,000 inhabitants. They serve to form a constant reference, but can be changed and reviewed if further conclusions require it: it’s always a learning process. For example, if we find that fitting 40,000 people into the Residential Zone is too difficult, we can reduce the figure later on and find a way

of accommodating the surplus in other parts of the city.

“Then, keeping our aims in mind, we would be ready to start working on alternative scenarios for each part of the city. At this stage it is beneficial to come up with a number of significantly different proposals in order to become clear about what the right option could be. The different options can be compared and evaluated using criteria derived from our aims and objectives. Finally a few plans would be submitted, along with a thorough documentation of how they were arrived at, to a wider audience for feedback and for making a final choice. (Participation should take place in a structured way parallel to professional planning.) When there is finally agreement on one particular plan and the planners have formulated their guidelines, architects can be invited to come in to do their work.

“So what we need now is a planning office with creative generalists and professionals who are output-oriented, who recognise what has to be done and go out and find the right ways and people to do it. I don’t think it is too difficult to find them: it is still tremendously attractive to build the “City of the Future”. But the precondition is a structure for how this department will function. The first person needed is a very competent urban designer and a general manager to build all this up.

“Once this is achieved and in running order, all Aurovilian architects who want to help in building the city can fit in easily. It’s not too late, the chance is still there. That is what is so marvellous.”

From an interview with Alan

PROFILE

“To serve each other as a big family – this is why we are here”

Kanniappan of the Abri Puncture and Repair Service explains why he is proud to be associated with one of the last ‘free’ services in Auroville.

“I have always loved cycling,” Kanniappan tells me as we sit on a log in a quiet corner of his busy Abri workshop. “When I was a boy in Edaiyanchavadi I used to cycle as far and as fast as I could. The roads were very different in those days, full of holes, but then there was no traffic to watch out for. It was so good in the old days”, he says wistfully. “As teenagers we did lots of sports and worked harder. I am always telling them today to get away from their computers and cell phones and have some fun cycling in the forest, but they don’t listen to me. Only in later years will they realize how important cycling and sports are to their good health.

“Cycling is also seen as a sign of poverty by many Tamils; it means that you cannot afford to buy a motorbike. My wife works in the Visitors Centre and she cycles to work, but both my children have motorbikes. After work I jump on my cycle and bike around the forest, or if I have a companion we may cycle 15 or 20 kilometres. When I was younger I used to do basketball, tennis and jogging, but now I have a knee injury I only cycle or walk. If I don’t do any exercise I cannot sleep well as I don’t feel good.

“When I was a boy I used to go to school in Aspiration for half a day then work half a day. I am now 48 years old and have had many jobs in Auroville. I started in the nursery with Narad, then drove the tractor in Matrimandir gardens. I also used to drive the children to summer camp in Kodaikanal. I also did lots of long distance cycling with friends to Chennai, Tanjore and Kerala and it was always wonderful to see the countryside as we would not go on the main roads. The bikes seemed to be stronger then and better quality. Nowadays the quality is less and they are much more costly.

“We do repair mountain bikes but I am not very fond of them; they are so expensive. A Chinese bike will cost 12,000 rupees and is not very well made for our Indian roads. Maybe in the future we will have someone trained in foreign bikes with the correct tools. If people would give us mountain bike tools we would love to learn to repair them; you cannot buy these tools in India as they have to be imported and are very expensive.”

I asked Kanniappan how the Abri Puncture and Repair Service started. “Around 1975, I was one of the team which began the Water Service.” He points to a busy-looking place next to his small workshop. “That is where I learned my repair skills, with pumps and windmills. When I started the repair service my brother Arumugam joined me and now we share the work. Now we repair as many motorbikes as bicycles and we are always very busy. You will not believe it, but we have to bring our own water here from the Solar Kitchen! The bore well here only has a small amount of water. When people come to take their repaired bikes away I feel bad as we cannot clean them and I have to explain these to them.”



Kanniappan (foreground) and Arumugam at the Puncture Repair service at Abri.

Four young lads are busily taking bikes apart. “I like to train boys to do repair work,” Kanniappan explained. “I learned from others and now I like to pass on my learning.

How does he manage to service bikes over such a wide area? “It’s not easy. We are limited with only having four boys here and having no vehicle to collect breakdowns: we have to carry in broken cycles on a motorcycle, which is difficult. My dream would be to have at least two or three more boys so we could help more people, but at present we cannot afford this.”

So how do they manage financially? “I get a maintenance, as does my brother Arumugam. The boys’ wages come to 10,000 rupees a month, which we have to pay ourselves. We have some regular sponsors like the American *Living Routes* students and a few individuals. We also do cycle maintenance for the Visitor’s Centre and rent out mopeds to guests and this gives us some additional income.

“We have always kept to the rule that we charge only for materials: we do not charge for labour or puncture repairs. This is our principle and we are proud of it and hope very much we will be able to keep it this way. This is the only free service, apart from the Free Store, which still operates like this, and we think it is very important because this is what Auroville is all about. This is why we are here – to serve each other as a big family. Unfortunately now everything in Auroville is becoming more and more commercial and we are becoming like the outside world.”

What about the future? Does he think that fewer and fewer people will be cycling around Auroville? “Auroville must become a Cycle City. It is the perfect place for it and would set an example to the rest of the world. When I visit Chennai to see my daughter and I see the crowds and pollution I think how blessed I am to live in this beautiful place. It just means we have to change our thinking. Of course, it would also help if we had good cycling paths to attract more people to ride, and a quick repair service as you can get a lot of punctures here with all the thorns on the ground.

“We have a good cycle club in Auroville and it would be nice to have a Tour de France here one day and involve many people...”

But aren’t the Auroville roads rather dangerous? And doesn’t this discourage cyclists? Kanniappan thinks for a minute. “I think it would be a good idea if we could teach road safety in the schools; that is the only way we will have better behaviour on the roads. Even I am too set in the old ways. I ride without lights on my bike as I know the way and think I can see in the dark. Until a few years ago all roads were narrow and you always felt you were in a village, even when you were in the town. That is why cyclists still ride two or three abreast, holding hands and talking into their cell phone. The change has happened so quickly that they cannot change with it.”

Talking about change, after all these years wouldn’t he like to do something else in Auroville? Kanniappan is adamant. “I want to work till my last breath in this service.”

Dianna