Before and after: The unsafe "ditch" around the reception desk in the Town Hall has finally been filled-up.

Pino: We are already working on it. Within a few weeks we will publish guidelines regarding the need to provide ramps and fully-accessible toilets and bathrooms in all our public buildings.

But the Samarthyam team pointed out that full accessibility means much more than providing ramps and special bathrooms. We are talking about the total environment.

Pino: True, but I don’t think we can cover everything right away. All public buildings will have toilets so ensuring they are accessible is simple. Providing ramps and handrails on all stairs is also not a big deal. But if we talk about providing lifts, for example, it becomes more difficult.

Isn’t one of the concerns that ensuring full accessibility will be very costly?

Susmita: Samarthyam estimated that if full accessibility is brought in from the beginning, it will increase construction costs by only 1.5 to 2% of the total. For existing buildings, we can incur more expensive.

Pino: In the new guidelines for constructions we should specify that an extra percentage be included to cover the cost of fully accessibility.

We’re talking here about public buildings which cost three or four crores each, so a few lakhs extra is nothing.

Frederick: A special fund should be set up, fed through a percentage from these large public buildings, to rectify existing buildings. If there is a will, the economies are not really an obstacle. We should also make a study of the local villages to see what the situation is there and can do now.

We’ve talked about the mental and financial blocks to ensuring full accessibility. But what about the aesthetic one? Aren’t architects worried that ensuring full accessibility will spoil the appearance of their buildings? Take the Matrimandir, Samarthyam recommended a number of modifications, like chair-lifts and handrails to make it more accessible. Are we willing to make these changes?

Pino: Today we cannot make the Matrimandir fully accessible; if we had planned this from the beginning it would have been completely different. But we can make it partially accessible. We can provide handrails on at least one of the very steep ramps which go down to the Lotus pool and we can provide a chairlift for the steps which lead up to the Matrimandir as long as it doesn’t compromise the aesthetics.

The Samarthyam access audit team mentioned that the spirul marble stairs leading up to the second level are a particular challenge.

Essentials for full accessibility

* Accessible routes
* Ramps at all entrances and exits
* Handrails on steps and ramps
* Improved signage and use of Braille and pictograms
* All doors should have a minimum width of 900 mm
* Antiskid flooring
* Accessible drinking water units
* Accessible toilet places and basins
* Acoustically-insulated rooms to keep ambient noise

So how do we begin to make Auroville more accessible?

Susmita: The Aurovilians team stressed that the first thing that has to happen is to pull down the mental barriers. Once this has been done, the physical barriers will come down more easily.

A mental barrier can mean ignorance of the needs of the disabled, but it can also mean discrimination.

Susmita: Exactly. One Aurovillian I know has a disability which cannot be seen. I asked her to come and work with us but she refused because she didn’t want to be identified with this work. She explained that once she had talked to another Aurovillian about her problem and this person had said some not very nice things, so now she wanted to remain quiet. Then there is the example of Christel. She was talking with somebody about joining Auroville and this person said, “I don’t want to be someone’s chair so they will never let you become an Aurovillian.”

Frederick: In other words, we only want the beautiful, rich, young, and healthy!

Susmita: Discrimination is also built into the language we use. For example, the term “disabled” implies “unable to function properly.” But my brother always uses the term “differently-abled” because, if for example, you are blind, you may develop other capacities which exceed those of sighted people.

Differently-abled people are often better workers because every day they have to prove themselves, so they push themselves to give their best of it. That’s why our commercial units should be willing to employ them.

Source: We must change the way we think. We used to talk about making Auroville a pedestrian and cyclist-friendly city, but now we must plan for an inclusive pedestrian city which is accessible for all. We also have to change this conception that the present condition of Auroville is only a problem of people who are physically-challenged. It affects everybody with reduced mobility, either temporary or permanent. For example, if you have a back problem you can’t cycle on the kind of roads we have now.

Practically what does it mean to make Auroville accessible for all?

Source: 1. Avenue should take the lead in drawing up a code of practice ensuring full accessibility of public buildings.

Extracts from Samarthyam audit recommendations

Matrimandir

1. Access

The access path has loose sand and it is difficult for many mobility aids, especially when wet.

- A paved path from the parking to the main gate is preferred, as it allows independent movement of persons using mobility aids.

- The reception and security people orient people with disabilities about the accessible path to Matrimandir and Amphitheatre.

- The vehicle already provided for children, senior citizens and others requires adaptation. Consider car-pooling person with disabilities including wheelchair users.

- The connecting paths leading to the Matrimandir are narrow (only one and half meter) and should be widened to allow wheelchairs to pass each other.

2. Access to Lotus Pond

Steep slopes lead to the Lotus Pond beneath the Matrimandir. Assistance of more than two people is required to move a wheelchair up or down. Old people and people with medical conditions will also require assistance.

- All slopes have handrails on both sides of the wall.

- At least one slope to have platforms or stair lift provision to carry wheelchair users or older people.

3. Access to petal meditation rooms

Access to meditation rooms in the petal areas can be provided by means of portable ramps stored in each room and made available for wheelchair users. Inside the meditation rooms there are two steps, portable ramps can be provided to access the rooms.

4. Access to Inner Chamber

A steep and a flight of steps mark the entrance to the Matrimandir. Lifting chairs are available for wheelchair users to be lifted manually up the steps. However, the process of lifting people up the stairs and further trans- fer on the way to the inner chamber is cumbersome and could be painful not only to persons with disabilities but also for the carers in attendance. Persons with severe disabilities find it difficult to balance and adjust in the narrow lifting chair. It is unaffordable and difficult to lift the chair with a person with disability on the marble spiral staircase.

- A stair lift both for outer stairs and inside steps.

5. Access to the Amphitheatre

- Ramps to be provided on the side slopes.

- Level differences at the beginning and at the end of the steps to be mitigated to provide unobstructed access for wheelchair users.

- Accessible toilet should be provided.

Town Hall

1. Entrance

- Directional signage for the ramp location to be provided near the steps. Handrails to be provided on both sides of the ramp.

3. Reception area

The unfriendly and technical design around the reception makes it extremely difficult to converse with the receptionist by visitors using wheelchairs and other mobility aids. (The area has now been covered with black stone, eds.)

5. Ramp to first floor

- Needs to have handrails fitted on both sides.

5. Steps to cafeteria

- Colour contrast handrails should be provided on both sides of the stairs at two levels – 700 mm and 1300 mm.

1. Cafe to counter

- A part of the counter to be lowered to 800 mm so that wheelchair-users and children and short stature persons can access it easily.

6. Accessibility ladies and gents toilets

A steep ramp without landing makes the entrance to these toilets inaccessible.

- The signage for accessible toilet should be provided on the wall.

- A ramp with landing to be provided as the door opens upwards and it is difficult for wheelchair user to open the door and move the wheelchairs simultaneously.

- Internally, cubs have to grab bars which assist in transfer from wheelchair to WC.

Bharat Nivas

1. Auditorium

The grad path that leads to the stage and handicapped entrance at the side of the Auditorium is difficult to negotiate.

- BR to the stage needs modification. Handrails are provided only on both sides.

- There is a need for unisex accessible toilet.

2. Kitty Kendra

- There is no easy access