



Suryamayi Aswini Clarence-Smith

Suryamayi Aswini Clarence-Smith is an award-winning researcher, educator and facilitator based in the intentional community Auroville, India, the largest intentional community in the world. She holds a PhD in International Development from the University of Sussex (pass with no corrections), and a BA from the University of California, Berkeley (summa cum laude). Her research on utopian and prefigurative practice has been published by leading editors and publishers in the field, notably in the Ralahine Utopian Studies series (Peter Lang), the Alternatives to Capitalism in the 21st century series (Bristol University Press), and the Antipode Book Series (Wiley). Suryamayi is regularly invited to share her unique, autoethnographic body of work as guest lecturer or adjunct faculty to students in university programmes worldwide, and to present to academic, activist and popular audiences at conferences and other events. She is the founding member of the Auroville Research Platform, an organisation affiliated with the Sri Aurobindo International Institute of Educational Research (an Indian research

institute based in Auroville) which supports research on Auroville. Suryamayi is a dedicated policy officer, and has considerable experience in designing and delivering inclusive and deliberative processes on complex and conflictual topics. She is also an experienced facilitator of conscious embodiment practices, a certified yoga teacher and facilitator of Awareness Through the Body (ATB), a unique integral education programme developed in Auroville which she has participated in since childhood.

'Dreamweaving'

An inclusive approach to urban design

Suryamayi Aswini Clarence-Smith

Abstract

This article contributes a case-study of a unique collaborative urban design method, 'Dreamweaving', developed in the intentional community Auroville, in India. It traces the emergence and elaboration of this method, and focusses on its most recent application, 'Dreamweaving the Auroville Crown 2022', a process that sought to address a conflictual urban design challenge in an inclusive way. The author, who was an organiser of the 2022 Dreamweaving process, reflects on the promise and limitations of using such an inclusive design method, notably in contexts with asymmetrical distributions of power.

Introduction

It is 2005, and architects in Auroville, an intentional community in India with a unique design concept for a city of fifty-thousand, the 'Galaxy model', are feeling the need to come together and develop common parameters for the urban design of various zones of the township, whose development had been stalled due to the lack of common vision embraced by the community-at-large. The emerging method came to be known as 'Dreamweaving', as architects were encouraged to 'weave' elements of diverse proposals together, and Auroville was envisaged as 'A Dream'. This article traces the emergence and elaboration of this unique 'Dreamweaving' method, and focusses on its most recent application, 'Dreamweaving the

Auroville Crown 2022', a process that sought to address a conflictual urban design challenge in Auroville, in an inclusive way.

Context

Auroville was established in 1968, in a rural area of Tamil Nadu with little to no infrastructure, with a few hundred people ready to be the international township's first inhabitants. Development in the early years was driven by the grassroots efforts of community members, and primarily focussed on ecological restoration, given the scorched land devoid of soil, shade and water on which they were located, as well as the construction of the Matrimandir, 'temple of the Mother', a space for spiritual concentration at the centre of the town. Auroville was founded with a unique intention, to realise a 'spiritualised society'.

Auroville's founder, The Mother, was a French mystic based in nearby Puducherry, at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. She employed the French architect Roger Anger to design a unique urban concept for this one-of-a-kind endeavour. Planned cities such as Brasilia and Chandigarh were being developed at the time, and urban blueprints have historically been associated with utopian projects, but Anger specified that 'this city will not be constructed first, and then occupied...it will be the inhabitants who will define by a living experience the needs of the city'. What he envisaged, in collaboration with The Mother, was a dynamic design inspired by a galaxy, with four zones, Residential, Industrial, Cultural, and International, spiralling out from a centre anchored by the Matrimandir, and buffered from the surrounding environment by a circular Greenbelt.

The Mother, having passed away in 1973, Anger later continued to develop the concept into more details independently. There were early criticisms amongst community members about his design process not taking into account ground realities. For example, ecologically sensitive areas, or the existence of local villages. Others felt strongly it was part of Auroville's mission to develop into the city designs by the architect, The Mother, Auroville's founder, had chosen and worked with. This opposition is ongoing, and to date, there is no Master Plan or Detailed Development Plans elaborated for the township because this fundamental level of disagreement has thwarted attempts at urban planning.

In December 2021, forced clearing for the realisation of a key urban design feature of the Galaxy 'the Crown', a central corridor connecting all four zones of the city, was undertaken with the support of officials of the Auroville Foundation, appointed by the Government of India. This included the ecologically sensitive area of Darkali, a key water catchment area and forest and the Auroville Youth Centre, while residences of individual community members were demolished for the same purpose, at different times. In the midst of this crisis, a 'Dreamweaving' process was held within the community to try and include various points of view, as opposed as they may be, into a design process to arrive at a collaborative way forward.

What is Dreamweaving?

It is 6am, and the sun is rising over Auroville. A group of community members are sitting together on a rooftop in contemplative silence. Their purpose is to 'delineate inspiring and uplifting architectural

and urban design parameters to lead...in the direction of building a "yogic" city'. The year is 2005, and anyone interested is invited to participate in such 'Dream Catching' sessions, facilitated by Auroville architects in 'an atmosphere of receptivity to whichever glimpses of the higher vision wish to emerge'. Sessions are dedicated to various planning themes, and participants are invited to share any 'subtle insights' emerging on these from a space of contemplative reflection. Over time, participants observe an output coalesces 'which everybody could immediately assent to but which nobody could claim as their own'.

To share the ideas arrived at and get feedback from the larger community, 'Dream Spaces' are created, where all the Dreamcatching outputs on a particular topic are pinned up on panels, and people are invited to reflect on and contribute to them. Over three years of regular Dreamcatching sessions, many areas of the proposed Auroville township are covered, including its Residential, Industrial and International Zones, its Greenbelt, entrances to Auroville, as well as the Crown.

The next step is for the architects to work together on specific designs, in a process known as 'Dreamweaving'. Each architect interested on working on a design brings forward a proposal, adhering to commonly agreed parameters, and presents it for feedback from others. The best elements of each design are identified collectively, and each architect is encouraged to integrate these into a revised design. This process continues until a final design, or designs, emerge which is felt by all to best capture the 'dream' for the particular area of the township in question.

The method is used successfully for a number of projects in Auroville, such as the Sustainable Livelihood Institute in 2015, and one of the gardens of the Matrimandir, 2018. While also used to develop a proposal for the Crown, 'Crownways', in 2008. The latter is dismissed by members of Auroville's Town Development Council for not being perfectly circular, a parameter that was not possible to integrate into an implementable design due to parcels of privately owned land. By December 2021, when forced clearing is undertaken for the Crown, it is along a perfectly circular right of way, even though the issue of land ownership for the project has not yet been resolved, nor has a design been presented to the residents. According to the *Auroville Foundation Act (1988)* it is the role of the Auroville Residents' Assembly, composed of all community members over eighteen, to 'formulate the master plan of Auroville'. The clearing is halted by a stay order, during which a Dreamweaving process is attempted to try and find a collaborative way forward.

Dreamweaving the Auroville Crown 2022

Unlike previous Dreamweaving exercises, the process for Dreamweaving the Crown is designed so as to actively engage and solicit feedback and inputs from clearly identified stakeholders, Auroville architects and town planners, Aurovilian experts in various fields related to the town planning process, representatives of different geographical areas and sectors of activity of the community, that being education, industry, and forestry, as well as randomly selected residents. Special attention is paid to ensure the inclusion of individuals, amongst the Dreamweaving architects and the process participants, represented each end of the spectrum

regarding the design of the Crown. One extreme being it should be perfectly circular, and the other extreme being ground realities should take precedence.

The first event is a three-day conference in which various Auroville experts and project-holders in fields relevant to town planning and specifically the design of the Crown, such as water, mobility, afforestation, economy, habitat, and so on, make presentations to educate the Dreamweaving architects. The architects also make site visits to various sections of the existing and proposed Crown. Two weeks later, they presented their initial designs to each other, and to peer Auroville architects and town planners for feedback. This marked the start of the 'weaving' process, in which architects were encouraged to borrow ideas from each other's designs. After another two-week period, they presented their revised designs to the various stakeholder groups, who were invited to comment on these in dedicated feedback sessions. Architects took this feedback into account as they worked on an ultimate design iteration, which was evaluated by all process participants, including the architects themselves. The goal of this evaluation is not to select one 'winning' design, but to identify what elements in each design are 'winners', in the sense they ought to be integrated into a detailed development plan for the Crown.

The overall process was well evaluated. Each participant group evoked involvement, collaboration, and the integration of views as the most important and valuable aspect. Many were appreciative of the fact the process embodied a harmonious, community-based response to a crisis situation, 'the whole community coming

together in such a peaceful manner' to 'arrive at a collective voice', responding 'to the community distress...with creativity'. While seemingly successful in terms of a collective decision-making process, its outcomes, however, fail to be implemented. Although the government official appointed to the post of Secretary of the Auroville Foundation had called for this community process, their initial agreement to adopt its outputs is not upheld, corroborating community misgivings the Dreamweaving process was only ever intended to assuage community members' objections to the ongoing, enforced approach to development. This harked to the challenge of realising the promise of inclusive design in contexts with asymmetrical distributions of power, and the concern such processes are primarily performative.

Conclusion

The 2022 Dreamweaving process became emblematic of the Auroville community's capacity to organise inclusive and complex planning, demonstrated high levels of expertise, and produced high quality outcomes, even in a polarised context. Many community members expressed the process design could be used as a model for the inclusive design of other aspects of the Auroville township, such as its unique economic and political organisation. Suggestions for improvement in future processes included, notably, to widen the diversity not only of participants but also to include other profiles than architects in the design roles. While this innovative inclusive design model could be used in other contexts, the experience of the 2022 Dreamweaving process highlights the need for other processes predicated on the inclusion of a large variety of stakeholders to secure unambiguous pathways to implementation.

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