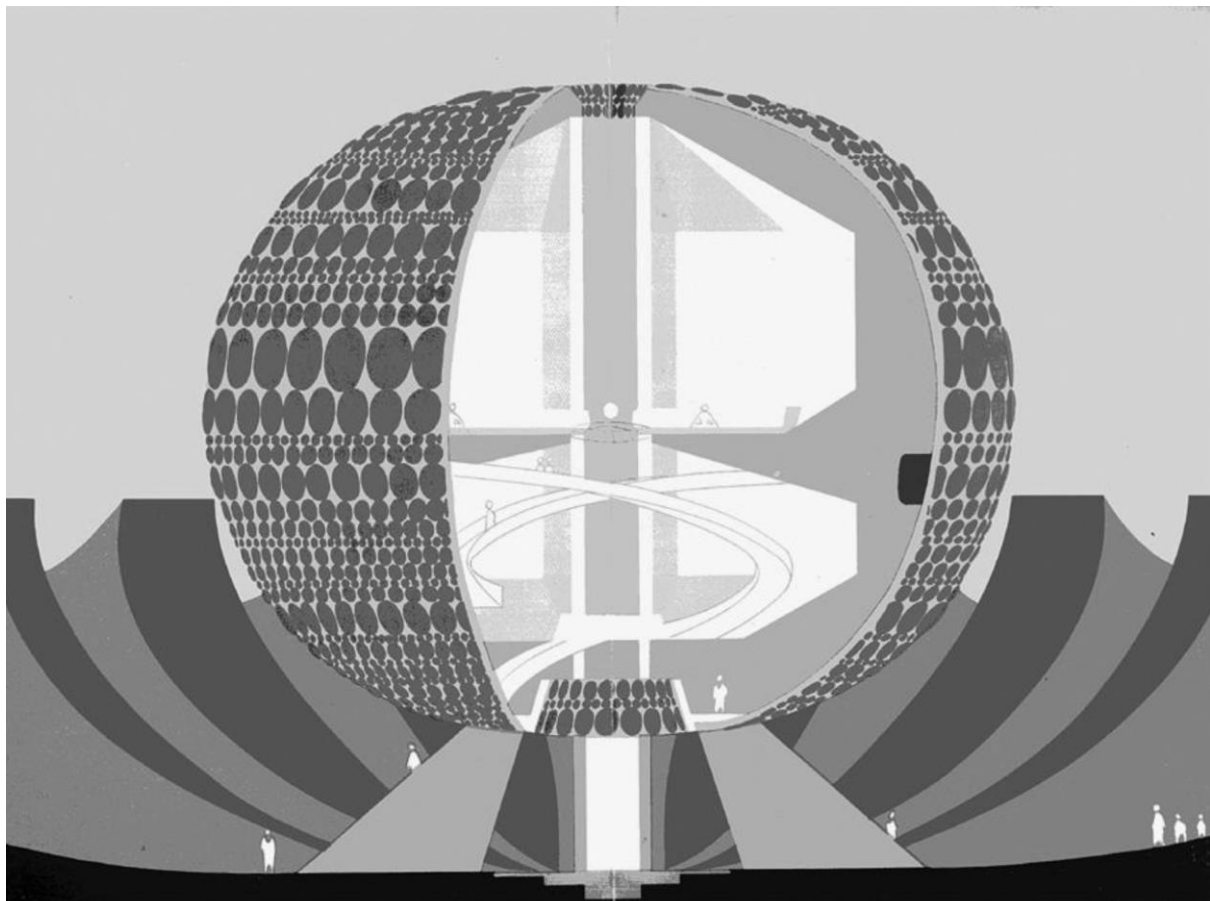


# MATRIMANDIR THE SOUL OF AUROVILLE



मातृमंदिर  
Matrimandir  
*L'oratoire de la Mère*  
*The Mother's Shrine*

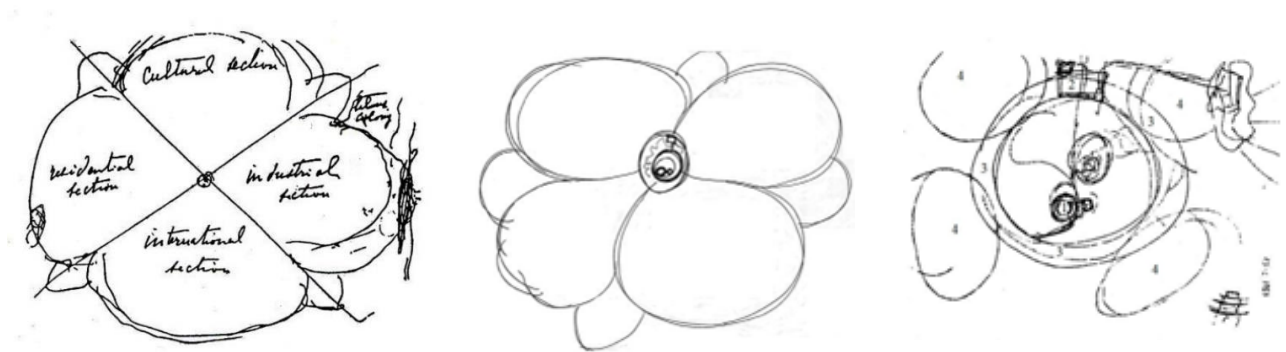
## PART ONE: MOTHER'S YEARS

### From the outset: *"a separate island surrounded by a lake"*

Heralding the new world and a society on the way to supermanhood, the Mother founded Auroville. She asked an avant-garde architect, in his early forties, who at that time was building the tallest residential towers of Europe, for which he would win an international prize, to build her town and its soul-centre, Matrimandir. Two aspects made of Roger Anger the man of her project: his futuristic vision of architecture – and his mediumistic capacity to channel the inner vision into architectural forms. Both are a prominent feature of the great architecture of all times.

Matrimandir is dedicated to the Universal Mother, worshipped under different names since immemorial times. On 23 June 1965, unveiling to Satprem her concept of the town, the Mother told him about the future Matrimandir: *"It will be the 'Pavilion of the Mother'; but not this [the Mother points to herself]: the Mother, the true Mother, the principle of the Mother. (I say 'Mother' because Sri Aurobindo used the word, otherwise I would have put something else – I would have put 'creative principle' or 'realising principle' or... something of that sort.)"*

Two days later the Mother drew some sketches of her future town in front of Huta. The 'Pavilion of Truth', or 'Pavilion of Love', was at the centre of the 'Park of Unity'; its twelve gardens symbolised the twelve attributes of the Mother. She explained that her plan was in the shape of a hibiscus, 'Godhead', which she had recently named 'Auroville'. She told Huta: *"Ah! Now, the Mother's Pavilion. This will be a separate island surrounded by a lake, tall trees, gardens with various kind of flowers."* The Pavilion, bottom right in the third drawing, was pagoda-like except for the roof; on 1<sup>st</sup> November 1965 the Mother referred to Kyoto's Golden Temple. She will rename it afterward Matrimandir, the Mother's Shrine.



On 7 September 1965 Roger submitted her his first report on the future town, which he shifted away from the Madras highway NH 66. Mother agreed and wrote: *"The park of Unity must be surrounded by some kind of isolating zone so that it is solitary and silent. One has access to it only with permission"*.

At the end of 1965 the Mother chose a solitary banyan tree as the geographical centre of Auroville. On 15 November 1970 she stated: *"The Matrimandir will be the soul of Auroville. The sooner the soul is there, the better it will be for everybody and especially for the Aurovilians."*



## 28<sup>th</sup> February 1968: Auroville Foundation Day

In January 1968 Roger brought from Paris a first model of the Galaxy (which the Mother signed), and another of its central area. He also brought the plan of the amphitheatre and its urn, two meters tall, designed by one of his prestigious collaborators, the mosaicist Charles Gianferrari. The banyan tree, the Garden of Unity and the newly-built urn were not yet represented; due to the difficulty of purchasing the land? Emerging out of a large circular lake, the Matrimandir – a sculpture ahead of curvilinear buildings, arranged in a semicircle, this too in a spiral form – was linked to the outer bank by a system of bridges. Along the outer shore of the lake were twelve gardens. The urn was commenced two weeks before Auroville's Foundation Day.



Auroville was inaugurated on 28<sup>th</sup> February 1968, at the presence of thousands of people gathering in an amphitheatre hastily dug; the white mosaic urn, in the shape of a lotus bud, was completed just in time. Nata<sup>1</sup> recalled: *“A wave of terror invaded me when I saw the stands as if taken by assault... what was meant for one person was now occupied by bunches of humanity ... The thought of the still-wet cement, unable to support this excessive load... And the miracle did occur. Not one brick moved, not one support gave way. ...”* A welcoming message by the Mother and the Auroville's Charter, translated into the various languages, were read. The original Charter document and, symbolically, a fistful of the earth of the one hundred twenty-four countries associated to UNESCO, plus that of all the Indian states, were deposited inside the urn. This procession went on for hours. Lastly the oldest and greatest disciple of Sri Aurobindo, Nolini Kanta Gupta, sealed the urn.



The two preliminary models of the Galaxy and its centre were on display. Among the exhibits under the banyan Tree, a poster stated in French the names of the twelve gardens that will surround Matrimandir: Existence, Consciousness, Bliss, Light, Life, Power, Wealth, Utility, Progress, Youth, Harmony, Perfection. Matrimandir stood for Love, and the banyan Tree for Unity.

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<sup>1</sup> Alberto Grassi, renamed Nata, was a count from Florence, Italy. An engineer by profession, after World War II he migrated to South America for political reasons, as many of his kind did. Settling in Pondicherry in 1963, he taught Italian and founded the Italian magazine “Domani”. With his wife Maggie he founded the Udavi School in a village nearby Auroville, besides taking over the incense factory Auroshika.

In the original model of the Galaxy, the twelve gardens of the Park of Unity surrounded the Lake; this implied that, before starting them, the lake is to be dug and sealed. However, this was not yet possible; this may explain why the Mother wished to commence with the 'Garden of Unity' around the banyan tree, smaller, but featuring the same attributes.

### **Mother's final vision of the Chamber**

On 31 December 1969 the Mother unveiled to Satprem her final vision of the Chamber. Before entering into it, she spoke about the gardens and the lake that, envisioned from the beginning, would supply water to the city and irrigate the land:

*"I am afraid they may not even have the land. That's the difficulty. Because the centre of the city has been fixed, but there's still a large part of the centre which, I believe, belongs to the government, so they're trying to negotiate so as to have it. (Silence)*

*R.'s idea is an island at the centre, with water around, running water which will be used for the whole water supply of the city; and when it has flowed through the city, it will be sent to a plant, and from there to irrigate all the cultivated lands around. So this Centre is like a small island and on it is what we called at first the "Matrimandir"—which I always see as a very big room, absolutely bare, receiving a light that comes from above, arranged in such a way that the light from above would be concentrated on one place where there would be... whatever we want to put as the centre of the city. At first, we had thought of Sri Aurobindo's symbol, but we can put whatever we want. Like that, with a ray of light striking it all the time, which turns, turns, turns... with the sun, you understand. If that is properly done, it will be very good. And then underneath, so that people can sit and meditate, or simply rest, nothing, nothing, except something comfortable underneath so that they can sit without getting tired, probably with some pillars, which would serve as back-rests at the same time. Something like that. And that is what I always see. And the room should be high, so that the sun can enter as a ray, according to the time of day, and strike the centre which will be there. If that is done, it will be very good.*

*And then for the rest it is all the same to me, they can do what they want. They first thought of building a dwelling for me, but I'll never go, so it's no use, it's quite unnecessary. And to watch over the islet, it was agreed there would be a small house for H. who wanted to be there simply as a guard ... Then R. had arranged a whole system of bridges to link that to the other bank. The other bank would be entirely made of gardens all around. Those gardens ... we thought of twelve gardens (dividing the distance into twelve), twelve gardens with each of them concentrated on one thing: a state of consciousness with the flowers representing it. And the twelfth garden would be in the islet, around (not around but beside) the "Mandir" with the tree, the banyan which is there. That's what is at the centre of the city. And there, there would be a repetition of the twelve gardens around, with the flowers arranged in the same way....*

*There are now two Americans here, husband and wife [Richard & Anie Eggenberger], and he studied for more than a year in... over there, to know the art of gardening, and he came here with that knowledge. So I asked him to start straight away preparing the plan for the inner garden [that on the Island beside the banyan tree] and they're working on it.*

*And so, it would be enough... [But then,] the answer is always the same: "We have no money!"...*

*There are material difficulties: for this islet, we need water – naturally, otherwise it's not an islet! To have the water, we must transform it – there isn't enough underground water.*

Satprem: There isn't enough water?

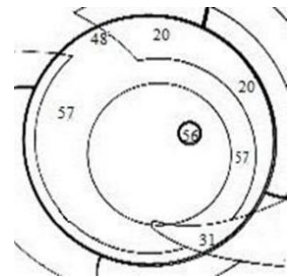
*There is water, but it's enough for one or two houses, anyway not enough to create a permanent flow. We would need transformed sea water. In Israel they have found a way to do it economically (we even*

*have brochures on this), economically... but you understand, economical for a city, not economical for an individual! So then, we'd need to have water to make this islet, that's the difficulty."*

Matrimandir, the banyan tree, the gardens and Huta's house would be in a silent, isolated zone, on the same islet surrounded by the lake, which Huta always confirmed. The details of the plan went through various updates; but the principle of Matrimandir being on an island with gardens, surrounded by a lake for hydric self-sufficiency, remained unchanged throughout. The two banks of the lake were linked by a system of bridges. The last garden was on the islet, beside the Matrimandir with the banyan tree; there would be a repetition of the twelve outer gardens.



Introducing Auroville's administrative zone, a French brochure published in 1970 explained: *"At the centre is located the town's spiritual and symbolical meeting point, the 'Matrimandir', a large water body and gardens surrounded by a row of buildings in which will be gathered all the function of urban management, administration, public services, spreading over 150 acres."*



Featured in the drawing: 20: Administrative offices. 31: Faculties. 48: Convention Centre (the future CIRHU, Centre of International Research in Human Unity). 56: Temple of worship. 57: Meditative gardens.

## Auromodel and "We want no religion": clarifications



PERSPECTIVE OF AUROMODEL

On 13 April 1968 the Mother approved Auromodel, an enclave of 2-3000 people needed to house the people who would build the town, but also to experiment with planning, construction, organisation etc. On 14 February 1969 she wrote to Huta: *"At the end of March, when Roger will come, the final plan [of Matrimandir] will be made. At the moment the plan of Auromodel is being made."*

On 31 December 1969, the Mother told Satprem:

*"That was why I did not insist on the construction of the centre first, because it would be that old cathedral again, that old temple, all that old stuff right away (Mother makes the gesture of planting in the earth), and then everything gets organized around that: religion! We DON'T WANT religion! ... This idea of a ray of sunlight ... whenever I look, that's what I immediately see. A ray of sunlight that could come at all time of the day – it would be so arranged... (gesture following the sun's movement).*



*And there would be something there, [at the centre], which would be at the same time upright, so as to be seen all around, and lying flat, so as to receive the full light – what would it be? ... And let it not become a religion, for heaven's sake! ... That the Force is now at work is without a shadow of doubt. And there is such a great ... (how can I put it?) it is a very active will: NO RELIGION, no religion, no religious forms. Quite naturally, people immediately ... So that's why I have left them very free. This thing... That was why I didn't insist on building the centre first, because that's in fact the cathedral of old, the temple of old, the whole thing of old (Mother makes a gesture of taking firm root), and then everything gets organised around that: a religion – we want NO religion.*

Satprem: Yes, but we can “pull down” something other than religion.

*But we don't pull it! It's the people who have it. They're very small, they need a religion, or at least they believe they do.”*

On 3rd January 1970, the Mother told Satprem about Auromodel: *“It is good – it must be started ... It is very necessary, it is very good”*. Remarkably, in this same conversation she gave for the first time a full description of the Chamber. On 28 March 1970, a meeting of the CAA (Administrative Committee of Auroville) approved: *“Item 4 of the Agenda: Progress on construction vis-à-vis Governmental grants: The Committee approved that top priority should be given to see that over the next three months concentrated efforts are made to prepare detailed plans, drawings and estimates for the entire Auromodel project = 5.79 crores, since only then we will be able to canvas with Government and foreign foundations for finance. Towards this end it was also felt that, if necessary, we should not hesitate to appoint full time staff for the purpose.”*

On 10 April 1971 the Mother answered affirmatively Shyam Sunder, asking: *“Auromodèle will now be developed as a first attempt at community life in Auroville. At the Centre of Auroville we shall build huts for twenty to thirty people who will participate in the construction of Matrimandir and its organisation.”*

### **A model in harmony with Mother's vision of the Inner Chamber**

The Mother had repeated visions of the Inner Chamber in the upper hemisphere of the Matrimandir. On New Year Day, 1970, she handed over to Roger the drawing that an Ashram engineer, Udar<sup>2</sup>, had made according to her instructions, precise to the centimetre. She focused on the ‘meditation hall’, leaving the realisation of the rest of the building to Roger (*“And then for the rest it is all the same to me, they can do what they want.”*). Not a Mogul miniature (as the Mother told Satprem in 1965), or a pagoda-like pavilion (as she told Huta around the same time), but a supramental sun: this is the Matrimandir the Mother will choose.

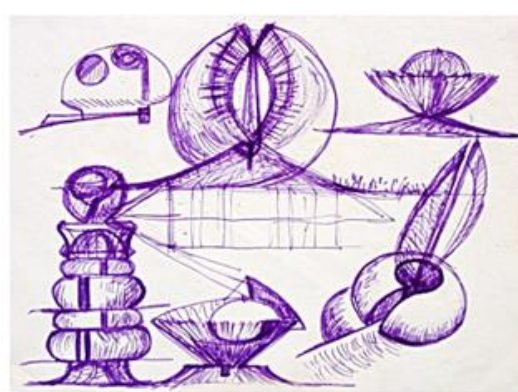
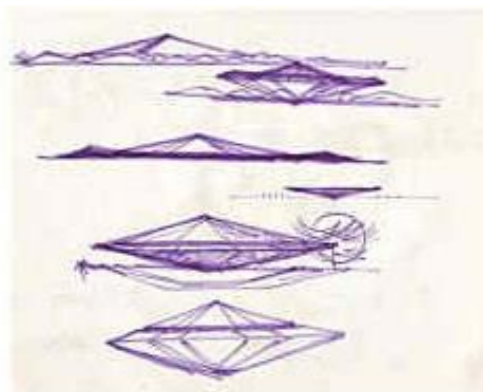
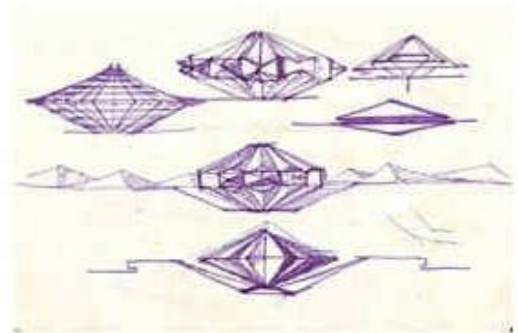
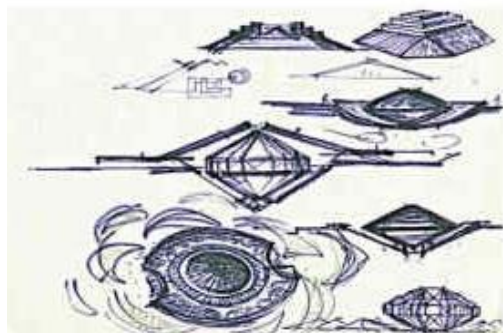
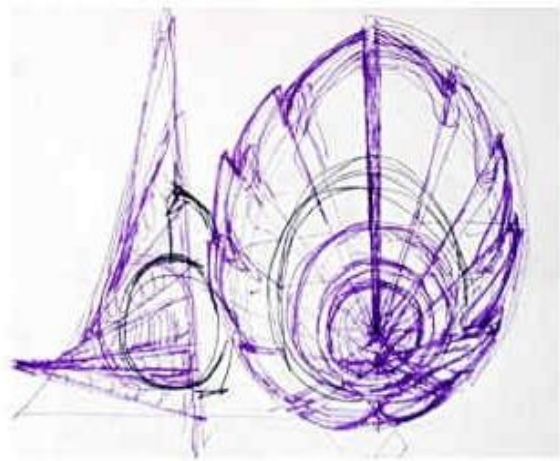
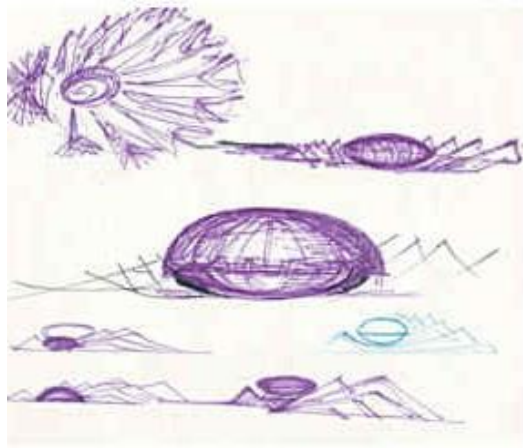
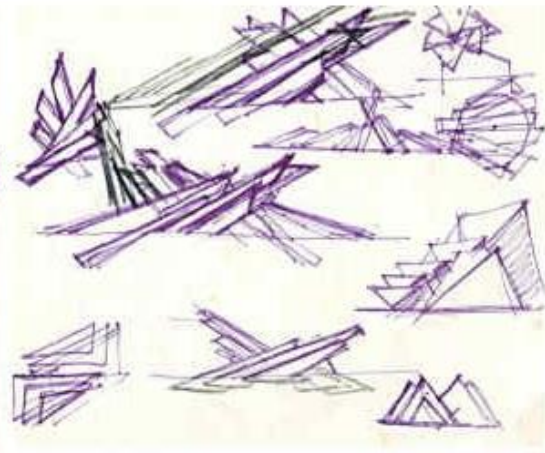


The lake would be dug when water would be found, but construction had to commence. But as soon as the Mother handed over to Roger her plan of the Chamber, he too felt the urge to start Matrimandir; filling a notebook with dynamic, sculptural forms, he set to work.

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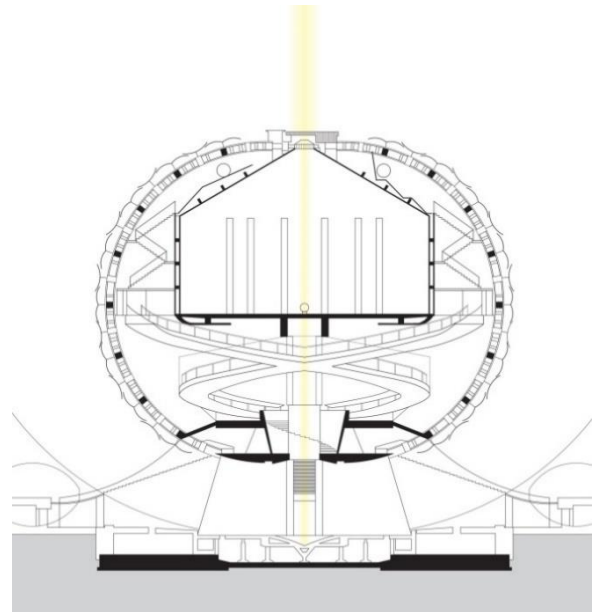
<sup>2</sup> Udar supervised the construction of Golconde; this iconic guest house was the first Modernist building in India. The founder of Harpagon, Udar was asked to build furniture for Sri Aurobindo.

# SOME OF ROGER'S SKETCHES FOR THE MATRIMANDIR

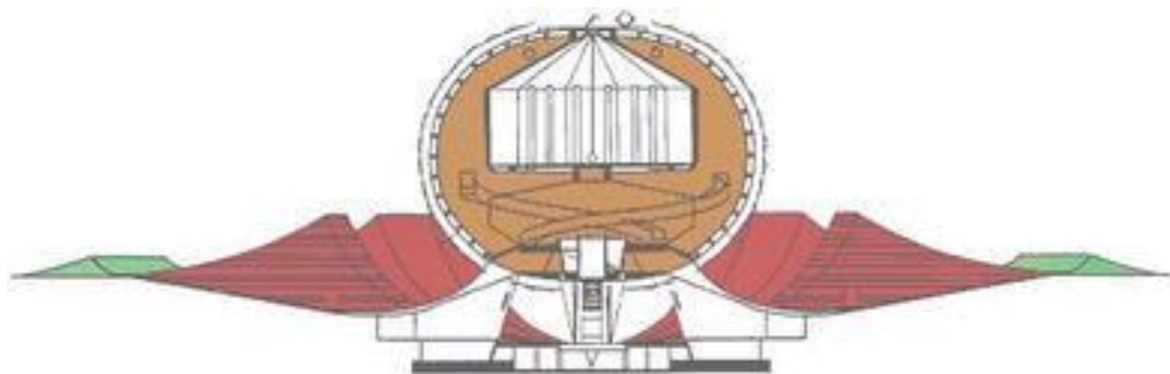


For the Chamber, the Mother had seen a dodecagon with twelve equal walls covered by white marble slabs; twelve white columns; and a thick woollen carpet, white, covering a wooden floor, same as in her room. The columns did not reach the ceiling; spotlights sat on top. In the centre, on a four-sided stone pedestal having the shape of Sri Aurobindo's symbol, would sit a globe suffusing the ray of an electronically guided sunlight, falling on it through an oculus at the apex of the dome. The luminescent globe would radiate natural lighting.

She told Satprem: *"the most important thing is this: the play of the sun on the centre. Because that becomes the symbol, the symbol of future realisations."*



The Mother described consistently the sunray hitting the globe as the crown of her vision. Regarding the globe, she described it as transparent, and at the end as translucent; this means that the light passes through, but the forms are blurred. Regarding the globe, once she mentioned plastic; ultimately, she blessed the acrylic ball suspended in a magnetic field that was reproduced in the Matrimandir fundraising brochure, in use for seventeen years.



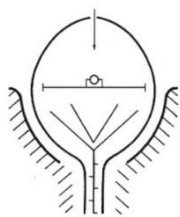
### Clarifications about the Italian architect Paolo Tommasi

On 3<sup>rd</sup> January 1970, on Satprem's insistence, the Mother met Paolo Tommasi and accepted his suggestion to build the Matrimandir first. But on 17 January she rejected all the changes Paolo proposed for the Chamber: they altered Mother's vision substantially, and even the exact measures she had given. These were the main alterations Paolo proposed:

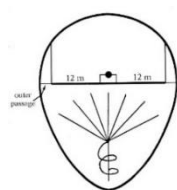
- the outer structure was a marble egg; the upper half was white, the lower one black
- the Inner Chamber was reached from a dark underground tunnel, starting below the
- amphitheatre
- a series of stairways, in many directions, led to a gallery along the walls surrounding the bare, all-white centre
- the huge carpet, held from corner to corner by the floating galleries, detached, like bridges, appeared as if suspended
- the tall columns with spot-lights at the top were replaced by back-rests, 50 cms high
- the height of the roof was increased.



Introducing Paolo's concept, Satprem told the Mother:



*"[Matrimandir is a shell, whose] entire lower portion [underground] would be in black marble and the upper portion in plain white marble." He continues: "So, when one arrives at the top of the 'stalk', there is a whole series of stairways in all directions, so that one can come up into the temple from any side... And then the centre is absolutely bare, and all around there is a kind of gallery by which one comes out from below; that is where all these stairways will be. And everything will be empty. There will be simply this huge carpet held from corner to corner by these galleries. It will look like as if suspended. All white, all uniform. And there was the question of the twelve columns... Paolo said that he felt the columns were yet another ancient symbol that didn't really go with the shell, and he suggested instead of twelve columns, symbolically one could put twelve supports, twelve column bases, which would serve as back-rests. ... Twelve large blocks about 50 cm high."*



At first the Mother appreciated Paolo; Roger had picked up some of his ideas and she wished the two collaborated; but then she started questioning Paolo's 'eggshell' ('the egg of Brahman'), divided into a lower half in black marble, and the upper one in white marble. She questioned the gallery 'floating detached', 'suspended like bridges' ("There won't be any accidents?... Ah! There are people with their head in the clouds who are all ready to break their heads on the floor... You see, it's a bit too mental for my taste, I mean that from the mental point of view it is very attractive, but in vision..."). The gallery was to be acceded by several entrances ("if there is not enough light, it will be a disaster") from the underground passage ("All that is mental. ... What is going to happen? Lots of unmentionable things. Humanity is not transformed, one should not forget it!"), in black marble ("And now, on top of that, he says that it will be all dark! ... Then what is going to happen in there?"). Furthermore, she went on repeating that she did see the columns. On top, Paolo even suggested to alter the proportions of the Chamber – and Satprem went as far as commenting: "But when Paolo showed me this plan, I got a feeling that it was something very beautiful... I'll tell you what I felt; I felt, I am present at the birth of Auroville." The Mother sternly replied, "No, it's not true." Satprem, "The material birth, I mean." And the Mother, "Yes, yes, I understand, but it is not true." After a long contemplation, she continued: "We are going to let it settle down. For you understand that in order for me to agree to changes, I have to be certain that the source of the inspiration is of the same quality as the one I had... For the execution itself, I am very well aware that people who know their profession are needed to do the work, but for the inspiration, I have to be positive that the source of inspiration is AT LEAST on the same level as mine... And I am not sure, because I saw so very clearly. And immediately, with Paolo's ideas, I saw a mixture coming in. All of his ideas are mental ideas, I guarantee you because it's easy for me to see that. Well, they all bring in the same MIXTURE that is found in everything that's being done in the world. And that... what point is there in beginning again-again-again...?"

The Mother wished that Paolo supervised the construction of Matrimandir alternatively with Roger, when the latter returned to his team in Paris to further elaborate the plans.<sup>3</sup> But Paolo, an architect who was mainly a designer and interior decorator, declined Mother's offer. After engineer Ramanathan resigned, unable to further commit himself to supervise the Matrimandir's site, at the end of 1970 the Mother substituted him with Piero Ciconesi.<sup>4</sup> She turned down Nata for unequivocal reasons.

<sup>3</sup> An illustrious precedent: Antonin Raymond, commissioned in the late thirties to conceive and build Golconde, the jewel guest house. When he left the construction site, Raymond appointed his assistant George Nakashima. He too was bound to excel, particularly as a wooden furniture designer, whose production commenced in Golconde.

<sup>4</sup> The architects Piero Ciconesi and Gloria Buffi, his wife and collaborator, graduated at the University of Florence (Italy). They received a two years training in Finland and practiced in Italy for six years before reaching Auroville, shortly after Foundation Day. In 1971 Piero was appointed as the Matrimandir site architect.

**Nata passed to Paolo the four crucial conversations on Matrimandir, showed them to Piero – but withheld them from Roger...**

On 1st January 1970 Roger was briefed on the Chamber directly by the Mother; all the work he carried on successively for Matrimandir streamed directly from her. In the endless trail of rivalries and deceptions, enacted by personages claiming to be close to the Mother, one more story surfaces. Nata had directed the amphitheatre's excavation; despite Mother's revelatory comments about Nata hitting Roger, Satprem sent a copy of the four pivotal Agenda conversations (31 December 1969 – 17 January 1970) to Nata, with the request to forward them to Roger and Paolo. But Nata never forwarded them to Roger... He showed them instead to Piero, though the latter had no Matrimandir assignment yet, and forwarded them to Paolo, who was not active either. Deliberately excluded, Mother's chief architect was kept unaware throughout; he will finally receive the conversations from Piero four years later; one year after Mother's passing, and only because Huta, Udar, Patrizia Norelli and Divakar, the four of them combined, tried to blow up the Matrimandir's Chamber and structure worked out with the Mother. Only after Piero, receiving at so explosive time the conversations from Paolo, passed them to Roger, did Satprem forward them to the Mother's architect.

The reason for Nata cutting off Roger are spelled out in the Agenda conversation on 17 January 1970. Nata wished that the Matrimandir was built in conjunction with the Ashram (and so did Paolo), under his own guidance: "*Nata, as an engineer, would look after the construction*" Satprem told the Mother. She refused right away. Regarding Nata (and Paolo too) not trusting the Aurovilians, the Mother replied "*Oh no, he doesn't know! It's all in the mentality, all in the mind. They don't know. WHO knows? It's only when one sees. There isn't one who sees. It's all thoughts and thoughts and thoughts – you can't build with thoughts*". Then she spells out the truth: "*You see, Nata has spent his time speaking ill of Roger as much as he could, saying all his plans are bad and his work couldn't succeed. Roger has spent his time saying "Nata has ruined all my work!"*". In the light of all this, how could Satprem expect Nata to forward those vital conversations to Roger, the one he excluded – whereas Nata, Paolo, and Piero were informed?

### **Full approval of the plan in agreement with Mother's vision of the Inner Chamber**

Blissfully unaware of such scheming, Roger carried on his work alone with the Mother. On 24 March 1970 – his 47th birthday – he submitted her a model of the Inner Chamber along with five different models for the Matrimandir's structure: a sculpture-like elliptical hibiscus, a polyhedron, a three-sided and a four-sided pyramid, and a small brass pot, flattened, put upside down.



Roger was intrigued by the two pyramids, but the Mother instructed him to keep working on the pot. He wrote: "*After having looked at them [the five models] for long, asking for the necessary explanations and spending time over each model, the Mother chose one to elaborate the concept of the present Matrimandir, and gave me her consent for the work as a whole.*"

# MODELS FOR MATRIMANDIR

24-3-1970



THE CHAMBER



THREE - SIDED MODEL



FOUR - SIDED MODEL



SIX - SIDED MODEL



EIGHT - SIDED MODEL



THE CHOSEN ONE

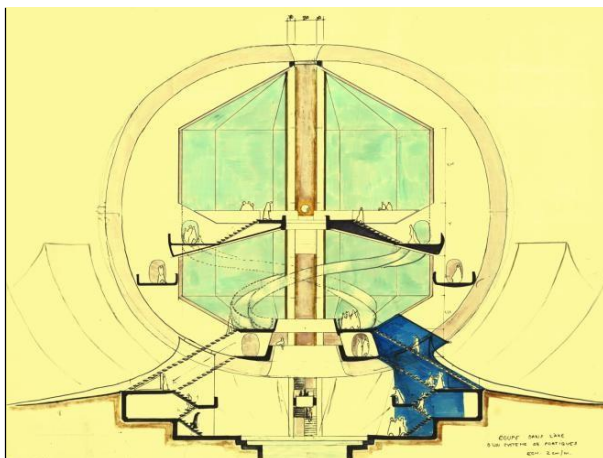


Four days later, Huta<sup>5</sup> wrote to the Mother; she dictated to her son Andre the reply: *“It has been decided and remains decided that the Matrimandir will be surrounded with water. However, water is not available just now and will be available only later; so it is decided to build the Matrimandir now and surround it with water only later; perhaps in a few years’ time. As regards the Matrimandir itself I have selected our plan which agrees with the vision I had of the inside and has my full approval. Therefore there is no need to worry. The Matrimandir will be built now and water brought round it later.”*<sup>6</sup> The Mother had passed two essential statements: the plan she chose for the structure agreed with her vision of the Chamber – and water would come later, *“perhaps in a few years’ time”*.

<sup>5</sup> Huta Hindocha (1931-2011) settled in Pondicherry with her family in 1955. Suresh Hindocha (who will pursue the Systemes Engineering Galaxy) is her nephew, and Laljibhai (the industrialist whom the Mother put in charge of Auroville's industrial zone) was her brother. The Hindocha family purchased most of the land for Matrimandir. Huta corresponded regularly with the Mother and illustrated Sri Aurobindo's poem “Savitri”.

<sup>6</sup> Huta, “The Spirit of Auroville”, p. 101.

On 14 August 1970 devotees gathered near the site where the Matrimandir would be built, calling for its material realisation. A card was released with the photograph of the brass pot, the chosen model; at the bottom, the Mother wrote '*Matrimandir*'.



In November 1970 Roger returned with new drawings. Matrimandir, now covered with golden discs, was surrounded by a double set of twelve 'petals'.



The final concept of the golden supramental sun was dawning.

### 21st February 1971: laying the foundation stone of Matrimandir



In February 1971 the Mother approved a new model representing Matrimandir emerging from twelve large 'petals', on an oval island having the same shape as Matrimandir, but ten times larger.





The thermocol model shown to the Mother was a replica of the original rosewood model, too large to enter Mother's room. The layout of the oval island was presented for the first time to the public on 21st February 1971, at dawn, when the foundation stone of the Matrimandir was laid. There was no trace of outer gardens or parks; the twelve gardens were shifted once more to the island, reverting to the original drawing the Mother had made in front of Huta on 23 June 1965, six years earlier. The size of the island was increased to around nine hectares, to include the twelve petals-meditation rooms around Matrimandir, the twelve gardens, and the urn in the amphitheatre. The size of the lake had to be increased proportionately to that of the island.

Two fires were lit, the third one at the centre of an altar; made of twelve brick columns of different heights, it was removed the next day. *"The foundation stone was to be laid not in the Matrimandir itself, but on the path leading up to the west entrance, so that even during the excavation it would remain in place"* wrote Alain Grandcolas, who had organised the ceremony. All those present walked to the sloping trench at whose bottom the foundation stone was to be laid. The ceremony was held on the Matrimandir site, but the foundation stone had to be laid on poromboke land, as the land for the final destination had not been paid yet.<sup>7</sup> Twelve busloads of people came, along with private cars and bicycles. The Foundation stone of the Matrimandir was laid at sunrise. The people sat in a semi-circle, facing the East. The Mother had delivered this message: *"Let the Matrimandir be the living symbol of Auroville's aspiration for the Divine"*. Nolini kanta Gupta read an extract from "The Mother" by Sri Aurobindo: *"The Mother's power and not any human endeavour and tapasya can alone rend the lid and tear the covering and shape the vessel and bring down into this world of obscurity and falsehood and death and suffering Truth and Light and Life Divine and the immortal's Ananda."*

Nirobdaran recalled: *"Twelve sadhaks headed by Nolini were selected by the Mother to represent the Ashram. I happened to be one of them. I was not in physical contact with her at this time. Some of us like Sahana and Sisir were the least expected persons to be named. The time fixed for the ceremony was early morning. Hundreds of people gathered in the vast open space; all kinds of vehicles were used to cover a distance of about ten miles; children, boys, girls, men, women old and young, Indians, Westerners – all had assembled for the solemn occasion. A sacrificial fire was lit – "A fire that seemed the body of a god" – with the chanting of Vedic hymns, and the Mother's music, in an atmosphere of hieratic stillness. The foundation-stone was laid by Nolini. Soon after, the Sun-God appeared in the eastern sky in his silent majesty and beauty."*<sup>8</sup> And Shraddhavan: *"Nolini and Aurofilio had brought a precious wooden box from Mother, which was sealed in the ground between the banyan tree and the present site of the Matrimandir as the land for the Matrimandir had not yet been purchased."*

Some organizers were travellers who happened to arrive at the right moment. A photograph of the smaller model, representing the Matrimandir with its golden discs (a simplified version, similar to the present ones) and the 'petals' in a barren landscape was reproduced on a card with Mother's handwritten text:

*February 21<sup>st</sup>, 1971*

*Laying the foundation stone of Matrimandir  
Blessings  
The Mother*

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<sup>7</sup> Despite multiple reminders to the CAA (Administrative Committee of Auroville) from Roger, all the lands for Matrimandir had not been purchased; Shyam Sunder had to ask a loan from the State Bank of India (without bargaining, as instructed by the Mother). As a result, the CAA was terminated and the Mother appointed Shyam Sunder as her secretary. The excavation commenced only on March 14, after the balance was paid. The foundation stone will have to be laid twice.

<sup>8</sup> "Memorable Contacts with The Mother" by Nirodbaran, pp. 78-79.

## **The excavation work commenced after paying the balance for the land still missing,**

The excavation work, by Aurovilians and Ashramites, started on 14 March 1971. The Mother sent this message: *"The fraternity of collaboration. The aspiration towards Unity in joy and Light. Blessings."* A Nursery to prepare the plants for the gardens was also inaugurated; asked whether they too should help digging, the Mother replied: *"No, the gardens are as important as the Matrimandir itself."* Some recollections:

Piero: *"On the 21 February 1971, it was decided to lay the first stone. There was the ceremony, and it was decided to lay the stone far from the center of the building, because after the excavation would have gone deeper, it would have been a problem to keep this place safe. The place, that was chosen, was near the banyan, but nobody remembers anymore where it is. It was buried, and then it disappeared. The ceremony was with a rich participation from the Ashram, and from Auroville; maybe a thousand people came. The funny thing was that the day after this ceremony, there was nobody anymore on the spot. There was the idea to wait until the contractor would show up and all that. So it was the sort of initiative of a few Aurovilians, who heroically and stoically decided to start digging, without knowing where the building was to come, only guided by I don't know what, the sun, the stars, by some intuition about where the place was. In any case the excavation was supposed to be very big, so wherever a small or big digging was happening, was not very relevant."*<sup>9</sup>

Tapas: *"It remained in the back of my mind, that one day I should come, and discover this place. It happened finally in 1971, when there was the inaugural ceremony of Matrimandir foundation. I used to come, with a group of Ashram members, on the bus to help for the digging on a regular basis. It was an outing for us from the Ashram to come out, and have the collective experience of working together. It was really fun. Whenever there would be an event, I would make sure I was there."*<sup>10</sup>

Larry: *"I didn't know much about the concept of Auroville, and certainly not about the concept of Matrimandir. I was near the center of Auroville by the Banyan, and there was somebody there, so I said, 'Well, I think I'll be around here to help with something, if there's anything anybody needs help with.'" It turned out that the next morning was when they began excavating at the Matrimandir. So, I showed up the next morning, and like Piero said, it was a very intriguing and beautiful experience, because you had these people from all over, and all different ages, and all different inclinations. Basically, we would be digging earth, and putting it in little pans on our head, and moving it from one place to the other. For the first time I felt I was doing something that I was actually supposed to be doing, even though I really wasn't sure what it was all about."*<sup>11</sup>

Savitra recalled: *"They dug with their small hand shovels, picks and crowbars, removing the earth in flat pans and wheelbarrows. Joining this first core of Matrimandir workers, a van would come each morning between 5:30 and 7:00 with a crew of a dozen or so who had other works during the day. On Sundays work parties from the communities and Pondicherry would form rag-tag lines of men, women and children, passing pans of burnt earth from the growing matrix to swelling mounds nearby, staining hands and bodies with its indelible red."*<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> "Memories of Auroville" by Janet Fearn:

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

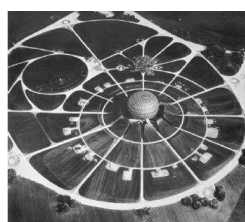
<sup>12</sup> Savitra, "Auroville the first six years".

## Essentials: interview to Roger Anger, April-June 1971

At the time of this major interview<sup>13</sup> Matrimandir and its oval island had been finalized. In it, Roger introduced the (acrylic?) globe that will appear in the fundraising brochure the Mother blessed, stating: *"We would like to keep this ball suspended and immobile in the air by means of a magnetic field."*



Paolo Tommasi showed to Roger the cover of Ajit Mukherjee's book "Tantra Art", and the quest for the Matrimandir's outer form was over when. Featured was a shaligram, *"the exact projection into space of an old Tantric symbol expressing Creation and Unity"*. Considered a form of Vishnu, a shaligram is a fossilized stone from the riverbed or banks of the Kali Gandaki in Nepal.



Significantly, Sri Aurobindo's symbol can be inscribed within both the outline of Matrimandir and that of the oval island. Circular from above, viewed from the side the building is slightly oval; the road encircling the garden has the same Tantric shape. The encircled area is ten times larger than Matrimandir; ten is the figure of accomplishment, the Mother replied to Roger, puzzled. Also, the figures 4 and 12, related to Mother's symbol, recur frequently. This is the text:

*"Q. What is the Matrimandir?"*

*R.A. As the Mother has said: "The Matrimandir wants to be the symbol of the Divine's answer to man's aspiration for perfection: the union with the Divine manifesting Himself in a progressive human unity". Here is the model. You can see how the earth opens as if it were under the pressure of an irresistible force. And the golden sphere of consciousness comes out of the depths. The spiritual meaning is obvious. It shows how out of the evolution of earth will come the new age promised by all traditions.*

*Q. If I understand correctly, this is a religious building?"*

*R.A. No. If it were, I would have designed a cathedral or a temple. The meaning of the Matrimandir is above all religions. It expresses the spiritual endeavour, the rebirth of man into a new consciousness – 'Realization' as it is called in India.*

*Q. How did you get the idea of building such a symbol?"*

*R.A. The idea is not mine; the Mother of Sri Aurobindo Ashram gave us the assignment. She told us to build the Matrimandir before other things. She gave precise indications about the measurements and the arrangement of the main inner chamber of Matrimandir. The measurements were precise almost to the centimetre.*

*Q. How could she, not being an architect, determine such exact measurements?"*

*R.A. This I don't know, you must find the answer for yourself. Well, with the information she had given us, we started to work and evolved an overall (general) shape that is nearly spherical.*

*Q. You have just told us about the meaning of Matrimandir and how the project was initiated. Would you now explain the architectural conception?"*

*R.A. Without going into all the details, I can give you a general description. We started with many models that were shown to the Mother and She chose this one. As you see, the overall shape is nearly spherical. Note that I said nearly spherical: it is the exact projection into space of an old Tantric symbol expressing Creation and Unity. When looked at from above, the building is circular – and when viewed from the side, it is slightly oval. From whatever side, it retains the same aspect.*

*Q. What materials have been chosen?"*

*R.A. Inside there will be white marble and a structure in rough cast concrete. Outside, this basic structure is not covered in a final manner: we chose to leave provision for future changes so that the*

<sup>13</sup> "Interview with the Chief Architect Roger Anger", Journal of the Indian Institute of Architects, Bombay, April-June 1971. The interview on Matrimandir follows that on the town.

*outer aspect of the Matrimandir may be modified in harmony with the Aurovilians' evolution of consciousness. In order to realize this idea, we have designed a plastic 'skin' that covers the inner structure. This 'skin' itself will be covered by golden discs, they too in plastic, fixed at the end of iron rods that will move slightly in the wind. The sunlight will be reflected on the entire moving surface and will produce a sort of vibration that seems to come from the building itself. It will give the feeling of a mass of light that is alive.*

*Let's now take a closer look. First we come to a circular area composed of 12 gardens, designed like opened lotus petals. None of these gardens is similar to the others. And yet, they make up an overall design. They are separated by streams that originate at the four points of the compass. These streams delineate the shape of the twelve gardens. All together they reproduce the symbol of the Mother. Separately, each express one of the aspects of the Mother through a floral decoration that may be changed according to the artistic wish of the gardeners. The flowers are placed in removable vats.*

*After passing those gardens, we continue on one of the paths giving access to the building. There are altogether twelve paths passing through a landscape of pyramid-like masses of dense earth, delineated by the streams that re-(unite) the ponds of the gardens. This takes us straight to Matrimandir. As we continue, the level of the earth keeps increasing on both sides, thus forming a twelve-sectioned crater out of which emerges the Matrimandir. We are now walking between two oblique walls, 30 feet high, as impressive as a fault line. The walls decrease. We are in the crater. And here is Matrimandir. It looks as if it was suspended in the air, in the centre of this strange corolla.*

*Before entering the structure, we see a water body under the sphere. The base of the building appears resting over the water that, though it is in the shadow of the building, receives the daylight directly... Let's look upward: Matrimandir is open, in the vertical axis, from top to bottom. A column of light pierces the building.*

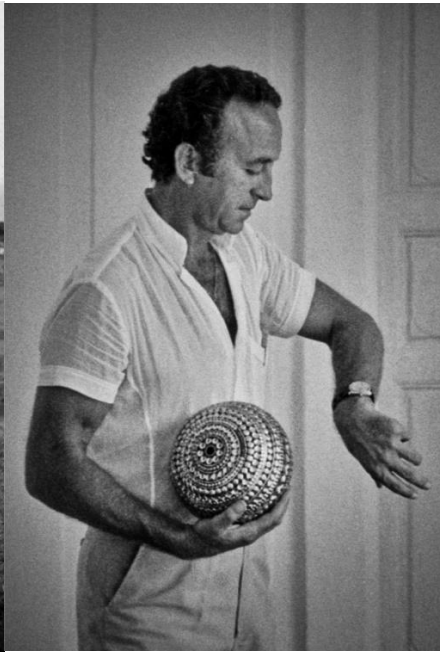
*The doors to accede Matrimandir are in the pillars. Entering the building through one of them, we climb a staircase leading to an elevated inner room. This room is a wide landing before the spiral ramp leading further on to the main chamber.*

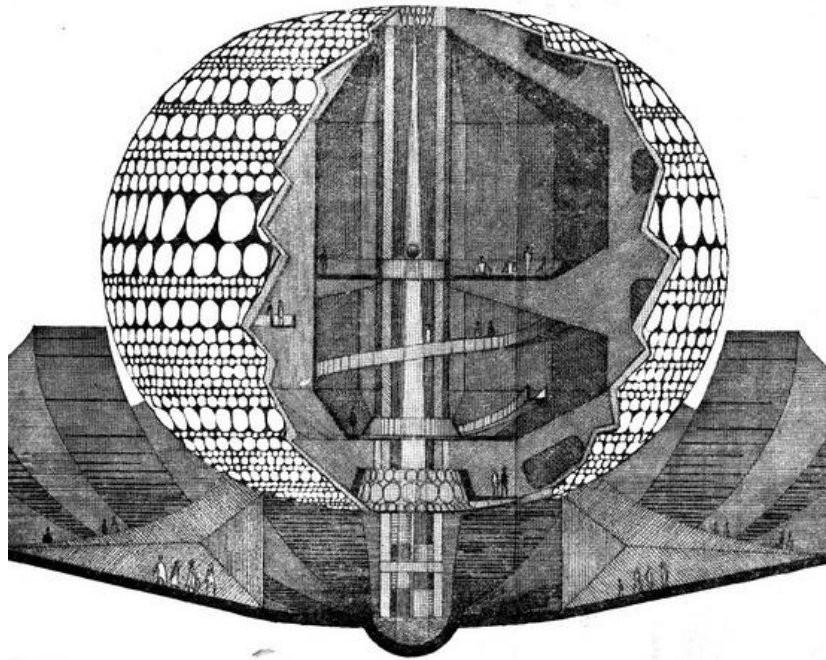
*Two spiral paths lead to this chamber – two others, outside. The landing of the ramps divides the area into four equal sections. In the centre, our sight is focused upon a luminous ball – two feet in diameter. It receives the light coming from the top, diffuses it into the room underneath. We would like to keep this ball suspended and immobile in the air by means of a magnetic field. It is easy to understand that this main chamber is dedicated to concentration.*

*Here is unveiled the second spiritual meaning of Matrimandir. Until now, consciousness emerged from the depths of matter. But there is another force, another consciousness, secretly similar to the first one. Yea, remember that we spoke of the light coming from above. These are two powers: one is hidden in the sacred heart of things and is at once their reason for being, their foundation and life. It is a rising force, a power that breaks open the crust of matter. But there is also a descending power that comes from the height, from the Supreme level, a downward force that awakens, fosters the emergence of an ever-new creation. The conjunction, the meeting of these two forces in the heart of Matrimandir symbolizes the perfect Realization.*

*Speaking of symbols, you have noticed two figures: 4 and 12, which in this composition recur frequently. Have a look at the model. You see the shape of Mother's symbol. It is a kind of seal that is integrated into the whole project. Finally, coming back to our visit to Matrimandir, on our way out of the main chamber we will start from any of the two spiral ramps between the frame in concrete and the plastic 'skin' covering Matrimandir like a cocoon. An opalescent light passes through the very skin. A last word: the road encircling the garden at the periphery has exactly the same shape as Matrimandir, that is, the Tantric shape we spoke about earlier. The area encircled by the road is exactly ten times larger than the Matrimandir's outline. Interesting... This happened without a conscious intention. Puzzled, I asked the Mother about the occult meaning of number ten. She answered that ten is the figure of Accomplishment!"*







### **A very strong centre dedicated to the Mother as Creator**

The Mother told Nata that she built Matrimandir for people who need it; for herself, a stone was enough. She also told Prem Malik: *"If they want gold, then it must be real gold"*, referring to the Matrimandir's discs. In June 1971 Roger noted down Mother's words:

*"In India for centuries the creation, the work of the Mother-Creator, has been considered anti-divine. Sri Aurobindo has taught/shown that it is in Matter that the Divine must be manifested. He has insisted upon the understanding of this concept of the Mother as the Creator. Matrimandir is to teach people that it is not by escaping from the world, or ignoring it, that they will realize the Divine in life. Matrimandir must be the symbol of this Truth. I don't want that this is turned into a religion, I refuse it with all my force. No dogmas, principles, rituals, absolutely not, absolutely not.*

Why do we build the Matrimandir?

*Most Indians don't need explanations, they know by their background. It is for the Westerners and the Americans, of who one in a million is able to feel it, that it is necessary.*

Will the Force more specially be concentrated in Matrimandir?

*The new Force labors everywhere, especially in this room. Do you feel it, don't you? There is here a density capable of performing miracles; but few are those able to feel it, to notice it. Sri Aurobindo and I have concentrated this Force on the whole town; it is palpable, perceptible as a very concrete perfume that penetrates, but one needs to be able to feel it, to receive it. But no miracles as people would like to see; for them to believe, they need material proofs without which they deny.*

*Build Matrimandir, put in place my symbol and Sri Aurobindo's and the suspended ball. I take it upon myself to make it into a very strong centre. Only those who are capable will perceive."*<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Roger Anger Archive.

## **To be built in a few years by the best contractor: the Matrimandir fundraising brochure**

On 13 March 1969 the Mother had forwarded to the Ford Foundation a 13-page letter requesting financial assistance for a feasibility plan to build her town in five years via the systems engineering. Navajata (secretary to the Sri Aurobindo Society) and Anjani Dayanand (Pondicherry chief secretary) sabotaged the attempt forwarding secretly another plan, by a traditional Indian planner, and the Ford Foundation withdrew. The final Matrimandir was a new attempt in the original spirit. Such a goal required a highly specialized contractor and the choice fell on ECC, Engineering Construction Company (Larson & Tubro group), already engaged in the construction of the Bharat Nivas. On 10 October 1971 Roger submitted the following to the Mother, who approved it with “Blessings”:

*“The building of the Matrimandir now requires the support of all men of goodwill, both inside and outside Auroville. The help of specialized and qualified contractors, backed and supported by the faith of the Aurovilians, is necessary for its rapid construction.”*

A fundraising brochure, A3 size, beautifully crafted, was published with the intent to complete Matrimandir at the earliest by hiring a major contractor. After going through the specimen submitted by late Prem Malik<sup>15</sup>, the Mother signed it with a full page ‘Blessings’. Prem told me that she checked all details carefully, on two occasions. Reprinted over and again, for the next seventeen years this remained the only Matrimandir brochure. In a note, kept at the Auroville Archive, Prem explained:



*“Having come to the Mother in 1968 I have been working for Auroville since its inception and have been associated with Matrimandir from the time it started. I was asked by the Mother to raise funds for it so in its initial stages I was closely involved in discussions about its design, shape, etc. along with Roger Anger who prepared three designs out of which the Mother chose the present one. I was in fact outside her room when she made the final choice. So the first point is clear that the present design of Matrimandir is the one that She Chose. In 1970 or 71 the Mother called me one day and said she wanted me to devote all my time and energy to raise funds for the construction of the Matrimandir. For this purpose we decided to produce a brochure which would introduce Matrimandir to the people. This brochure gave a lot of details and I had the opportunity along with Roger to see the Mother a couple of times to explain these to her. She looked at all the drawings carefully and asked detailed questions about the various dimensions etc. ...”*

The urgent scope being fundraising, there was no time to come up with 100% exact calculations. However, this remains as the proof of the original concept of Matrimandir and the Peace area (in this document, called *“The centre of Auroville, centre of Force”*), approved and blessed by the Mother. Had the required amount been available (the estimated cost was Rs. 1 crore), the model would have been executed by EEC, and ideally completed by 15<sup>th</sup> August 1972: Sri Aurobindo’s Centenary Day. More realistically, the date was later changed to Mother’s Centenary Day, 21<sup>st</sup> February 1978. After Mother’s passing the ‘soul’ of ‘the town of the future’, too revolutionary to be understood, underwent endless modifications. But the truth of its essence, and its secret, remain.

Besides the photograph of the ‘Galaxy’, the brochure featured two impressive drawings (four-pages wide, folded in two), depicting a section of the structure along with that of the Chamber. The ball suspended in a magnetic field also appeared.

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<sup>15</sup> After the health of Laljibhai Hindocha declined, the Mother put Prem Malik in charge of the economic section.

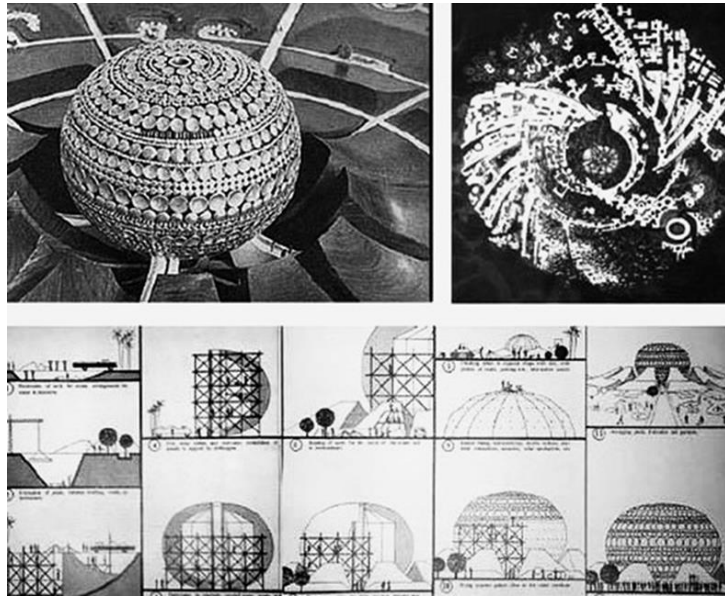


Close-ups from the rosewood model were presented, and the future gardens on the oval island were mentioned. *“Flowers give an extremely colourful look to the place. They are displayed in twelve gardens surrounding Matrimandir and chosen in accordance to their real significance, to the state of consciousness which they express. Around the banyan tree, the Garden of Unity allows for the coming together of all floral hues. Three roads lead to the area. An information centre surrounded by greenery will be placed at the southern entrance. When Auroville is built, a lake will transform the complex into an island.”* The states of consciousness symbolized by the flowers of *“the Garden of Unity with its own centre, the banyan tree”* were listed, but there was no mention of any outer garden or park. Despite the chronic lack of funds, those gardens were about to be commenced on 24 November 1972, Sri Aurobindo’s siddhi day, with Mother’s consent.

Below are relevant data featured in the fundraising brochure:

1. The inner structure was to be completed in 12 months.
2. The light envelope structure [*not the present ferrocement structure, but one in aluminum or steel*] was to be placed in 2 months.
3. Such features as the formation of petals, general leveling, roads, arboriculture would have taken 2 months
4. The completion of the petals (tiling), that of the roads, parking lots and the information centre, 3 months.
5. The interior fittings (besides the electrical connections, acoustics, solar mechanisms etc.), 6 months.
6. The fixing of the polyester disks, 2 months.
7. The pools, fountains and gardens, 2 months.
8. The interior decoration and furnishing, 1 month





Below is a reproduction of the last page, which is self-explanatory:

***APPROXIMATE COST OF THE TWELVE STAGES OF CONSTRUCTION  
AND TIME SCHEDULE***

1) Excavation of earth for crater, arrangements for water & electricity - 5 months	1,500,000
2) Formation of petals, general levelling, roads, arboriculture - 4 months	500,000
3) Foundations, piers and four pairs of reinforced concrete ribs - 4 months	500,000
4) First stage ramps and staircases, completion of portals to support the dodecagon - 4 months	500,000
5) Dodecagon in concrete, second stage ramps and staircases - 4 months	600,000
6) Shaping of earth for the petals of the crater and its environment - 3 months	200,000
7) Placing in position the light structure defining first envelope of Matrimandir - 2 months	300,000
8) Finishing petals to required shape with tiles, completion of roads, parking lots, information centre - 3 months	900,000
9) Interior fittings and renderings, marble surfaces, electrical connections, acoustics, solar mechanism, etc. - 6 months	600,000
10) Fixing exterior golden polyester disks to the outer envelope - 2 months	200,000
11) Arranging pools, fountains and gardens - 2 months	1,000,000
12) Interior decoration and furnishing – 1 month	2,000,000
Total	10,000,000

**A futuristic vision calls for a futuristic architecture: dawning of the supramental age**

Raising architecture to the domain of pure art, over the past decades attempts have been made to transcend the limits of matter through enhanced technology and science. Hi-Tech architecture (also known as Late Modernism or Structural Expressionism) and its sculptural forms have become symbols of our age, boldly defying the laws of nature. The Hi-Tech architect is an artist and a visionary whose

creations, challenging the impossible, are made real by state-of-the-art-engineering. Thriving in North America and Europe, Hi-Tech emerged in the seventies, standing for the highest form of technology available. While using mostly steel and glass like Modernism to enhance aesthetics, it revamped that style by incorporating into building design industrial objects found in catalogues for residential settings. Because of the exposure of mechanical services, an early definition was 'serviced sheds'.<sup>16</sup>

Evolving out of High-Tech, whose themes it further developed, Neo-Futurism is a late-20th/early-21st century movement involving arts, design, and architecture. Norman Foster, Kenzo Tange, Renzo Piano, Richard Rogers, Michael Hopkins, Santiago Calatrava are prestigious names encompassing both, Hi-Tech and Neo-Futurism.

Inspired partly by Futurist architect Antonio Sant'Elia ("The new city", "Manifesto of Futurist Architecture", 1916) and by styles such as Art Deco and later the Googie movement, in the fifties and sixties NeoFuturism was pioneered by the structural expressionist work of Alvar Aalto, Buckminster Fuller, the architect and industrial designer Eero Saarinen, the avant-garde architectural group Archigram lead by Peter Cook and others. This movement gave birth to sculptural structures that, the unique work of their creators, don't look like anything else around them. They shunned strict geometric forms and often featured curving, shiny surfaces and towering roofs.

Rethinking the functionality of design in fast-growing cities, refurbished neighbourhoods, restructured industrial settlements or transport areas, Neo-Futurism departs from the referential style of Post-Modernism. Each architectural design is unique, with domes, spirals, everything that is out of the box and conveys movement. Featuring bold dynamic forms, fluid and asymmetric, its architecture is characterized by sleek lines, the usage of different innovative materials such as glass, aluminium, steel and more recently wood, carbon fibre, composites. Creating spaces that are as functional as aesthetically striking, with bold, unconventional forms and structures that convey speed and strength, its manifestos are advanced technology, cutting-edge engineering and digital tools, renewable energy-efficient systems, ecologically responsible structures and environmental friendliness. Giants such as two Pritzker Architecture Prize-winning architects – Dame Zaha Adid and Sir Norman Foster – and the structural engineer and architect Santiago Calatrava are the signpost.

Architecture in its most futuristic forms requires an architect who has the vision and engineers trained for realization. Did Roger Anger draw the force of his architectural explorations directly from the Mother, transmitting it to his Parisian team as well? An avantgarde architect embodying the drives of his age in the light of a spiritualised society, and a seeker upon whom the Mother channelled her force, Roger sought sculptural forms to be brought into existence by advanced technology. This was the spirit, in art and architecture manifesting in full, heralding a new age and society of which the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the century of idealism, was the crucible.

### **The 'Avatar's model town'**

Those were exalting years, Mother's Auroville was the supreme adventure. In 1969, to build in five years the systems engineering Galaxy, the Mother chose the Planning Research Corporation, Los Angeles, collaborating with NASA to send the first American astronauts to the moon. Had Roger been assured the services of so advanced professionals, the 'Avatar's model town' would have been a living

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<sup>16</sup> The two iconic skyscrapers (1949-51) by Mies van der Rohe, on the Chicago Lake Shore Drive, were a preliminary example, redefining high-rise living for the post-war generation.

display of what the genius of architecture, engineering, and town planning combined can make true. Adopting the latest technologies and materials, Roger's town was meant to be plastic and ever-changing. Even the residences would have mobile partitions, stretching or shrinking at will. Mobility over a fixed structure for him was a cardinal postulate, as he stressed in the already mentioned interview (Journal of the Indian Institute of Architects, Spring 1971), referring to the previous model, the Macrostructures/Yin-Yang one:

*“Auroville will be a totally unprecedented psychological, social, educational and architectural experiment. This progressive growth does not refer to the number of inhabitants, which will not exceed fifty thousand, but to an evolution of the physical body, of the life of Auroville, of its society and of its genius as well. This is why the most plastic formula from the urbanist's viewpoint will be the best. Here, by the way, we come to what will be the principle of tomorrow's urbanism: giving to the town basic lines of power, main penetration channels, through a macrostructure that shapes the outlook and facilitates an inner direction. Then, just as with a bottle-rack, a mobile microstructure is fitted in, which can be changed, modified according to the needs of the town, of the zone, as well as the individuals'. Urbanism cannot be separated from plastic, open-ended architectural vision. Both are striving for an environment where man can joyfully live and evolve. A macrostructure, like a mountain, cannot be changed easily. The macrostructure is an arrangement of space involving an underworld of sewage pipes, of water and electricity connections, main circulation ways wandering through the surface relief, natural or artificial climatic conditions bathing the whole complex. Once the macrostructure is positioned, everything becomes possible. On this structure is laid an outer skin, changeable and plastic so that it may be stretched, so that its colour may be altered. Such an approach is the only one that will allow an evolution of the town in time and within a given space. The clothing of the town may be changed, renewed without drastic destruction.”*

When I displayed in Pitanga my first exhibition on Hi-Tech architecture Kireet Joshi (the Vedic and aurobindonian scholar who, those years, was the Chairman of the Auroville Foundation) noted down on a paper: *“In every form I see the Supermind”*.

Mother's Matrimandir streams from that plane. In character with the state-of-the-art town to be built, the Matrimandir featured in the fundraising brochure, A3 size, which she signed with a full-page blessing, is a High-Tech prototype transmuting into NeoExpressionism/NeoFuturism. Forerunning the supramental age, the original Matrimandir heralded all of these.

Roger Anger was inspired by the light-weight Biosphere designed by Buckminster Fuller for the 1967 Montreal Expo. Since then that geodesic dome, *“an enclosed structure of steel”*, has been an inspirational source for Hi Tech projects all over the world. Roger's flattened sphere too featured a tubular metal structure, to be assembled in two months. A translucent membrane enveloped it as in a cocoon; the first idea was to use the rust-proof material wrapping the outnumbered warships for everlasting protection, before sinking them. The whole would be covered with discs in some synthetic material, so light that they would move by the wind.

In 1978 Ajit Koujalgi<sup>17</sup>, a young Aurovilian architect who was part of Aurofuture, submitted two large studies to implement the project. The weathered steel structure was to be covered by a synthetic

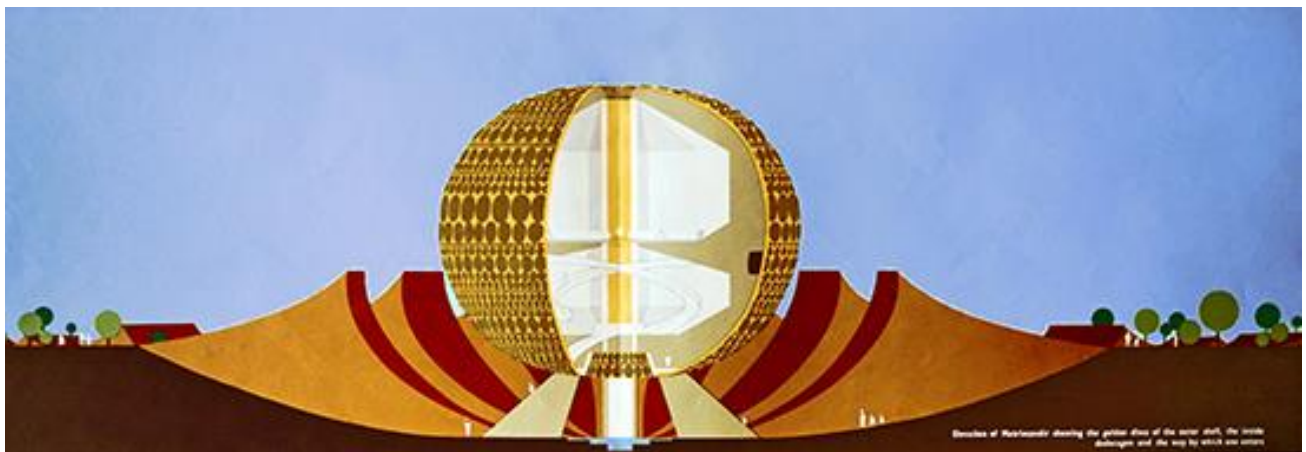
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<sup>17</sup> Ajit Koujalgi presented his research in two large, beautiful Ashram hand-made paper albums that he confided to me as his treasures. When General Krishna Tewari founded the Auroville Archive, the Centre for Human Unity forwarded our complete collection. In later years I discovered that Ajit's two large albums have disappeared (only the small version remains) and so has the Matrimandir fundraising brochure, with Mother's handwritten “Blessings. Santosh (Prem Malik's widow) and Aster Patel, heavily distressed, gave me the news.

membrane and Teflon discs, those years a fashionable material; mounted on a net 'skin', they would have swayed with the wind, mirroring the passing clouds and the water's ripples of the pond with real lotuses underneath. A pond of lotuses underneath the Chamber would receive the ray of sunlight that, after reaching the acrylic ball, in the centre, suspended on a magnetic field, would pierce through a metal grid featuring Mother's symbol and reach the pond.<sup>18</sup>

Was Roger playing alone with forms and new materials? Mother's unconventional approach emerges from her suggestion of *"a globe made of plastic material or... I don't know"* as the most sacred object at the centre of *"the town of the future"* (Mother's Agenda, 3 January 1970). What this (acrylic?) *"suspended ball"* is about is unveiled in the same interview to Roger: *"In the centre, our eyes are focused on a luminous ball – 2 feet in diameter. It receives the light coming from the top, diffuses it into the room beneath. We would like to keep this ball suspended and immobile in the air by means of a magnetic field."*

Madanlal Himatsingka, the major fundraiser, told me that the original Matrimandir was so light that Roger fantasised that it could move around on wheels. But in 1978 a community meeting in the amphitheatre dismissed it, due to lack of funds. Piero was mandated to go ahead with the ferrocement structure he had presented, to be covered by a bald concrete shell. Roger left, and instead of a prefabricated structure to be assembled in two months we got a ferrocement one that it took nine years to build.

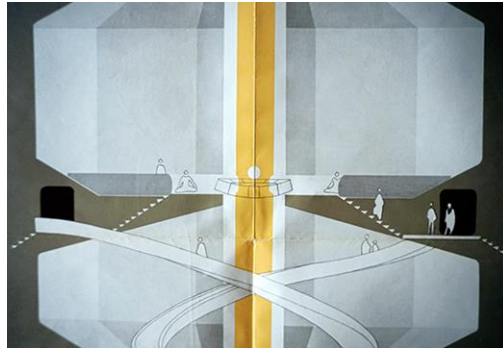


Hadn't the Mother told Roger: *"Build Matrimandir, put in place my symbol and Sri Aurobindo's and the suspended ball. I take it upon myself to make it into a very strong centre. Only those who are capable will perceive it"*?

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<sup>18</sup> In the fundraising brochure no pedestal appears under the suspended ball. However, in the model that the residents endorsed overwhelmingly on 15.10.1987, Roger would have managed to position over the metal grid a pedestal for the globe, if needed. But he assigned the execution of the Chamber to Piero Cicionesi and kept his word; not even when disagreeing, as in the case of the white marble slab that Piero (associating with Paolo Tommasi despite Roger's wish) substituted to the metal grid, thus making the lotus pond impossible.





### **The residents wished that only volunteers, not paid workers, build Matrimandir**

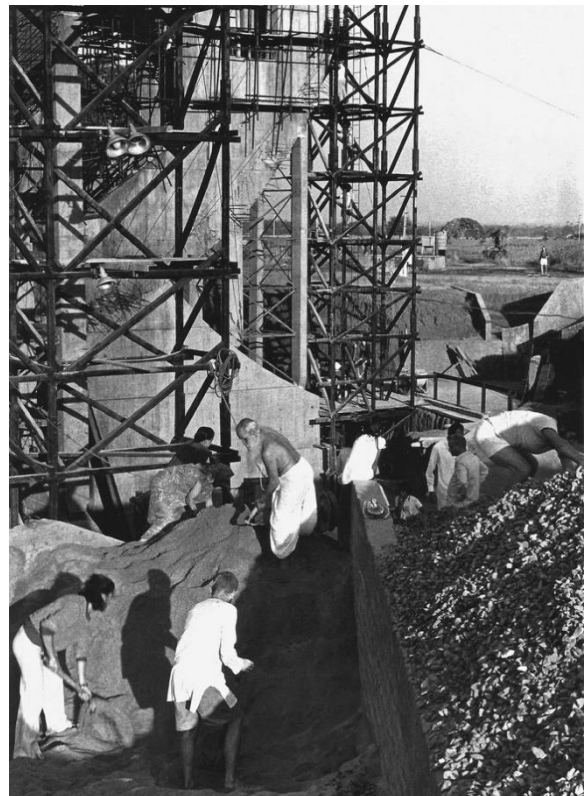
On 3 November 1971 Alain Grandcolas<sup>19</sup> asked the Mother what she recommended for the Matrimandir's construction. She replied:

*"Strength, safety, durability, harmonious balance.*

*The foundations are especially important and should be done by experts.*

*There is room for everyone of goodwill, and for those who in all sincerity and simplicity want to offer their work, there is enough to keep them usefully occupied."*

Alain reported that Piero went to an industrial set up in Neyveli asking for an earth excavator, to dig the foundations; instead, the Mother choose people from nearby villages to give them means of livelihood. This came as a shock to many Aurovilians inspired by a book, "On the way towards Supermanhood", in which Satprem wrote: *"And if, one day, those ten or fifty or those hundred could build a single small pyramid of truth every stone of which would have been laid with the correct note, the right vibration, the simple love, the clear look and the call of the future, in truth the whole city would be built, for they would have built in themselves the being of the future."* Because of Satprem, they concluded that only volunteers, and not paid workers, should build Matrimandir. The early years a number of ashramites were ferried by bus, daily; one of them was Champaklal, Sri Aurobindo's attendant. When in 2003 I displayed at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram the first and only official exhibition about Mother's town and Matrimandir, all those sadhaks flocked to see it, movingly recollecting the magic years.



*"After 8 months during which the excavation work of the Matrimandir was reserved to aurovilians, ashramites and voluntary workers, the arrival of paid villagers has been opposed by the quasi-*

<sup>19</sup> Formerly a French bank manager, Alain Grandcolas was associated from the beginning with Matrimandir, its gardens and pathways.

*unanimity of Aurovilians who manifested their disagreement by boycotting the digging of the Matrimandir during more than 2 weeks” Alain wrote. A few Aurovilians (Kenneth the poet was one) started digging, without calculations. The Ashram engineer was Ramanathan, associated to Roger from the beginning; but the real location was not yet available, even the foundation stone was temporary only and its location was soon forgotten.*

On 7 November 1971 Ruud Lohman<sup>20</sup> noted down in his journal: *“Yesterday morning we had another meeting at the Centre. We didn’t understand anything anymore. Letters went back and forth between Mother and the offices and now all of sudden things take a new turn, the digging will be done by Tamil workers, to be finished by February 1972 and then a contractor will take over to complete the pillars by August 1972. It seems a serious thing: the Aurovilians who are here now can’t get it done and even here we have to employ paid labour. The Tamilians come with their own teams and have their own rhythm, and we would only be in the way. And so we lost our most important project.”*



*“Earth-moving equipment was suggested but rejected because of its incapacity to negotiate the steep incline, its expense, and the general undesirability of heavy machinery when avoidable. It was decided to employ large numbers of villagers in traditional hand methods. Beginning in November a swarm of 400 labourers began chipping away bit by bit and by February 21<sup>st</sup> of 1972, the excavation was completed. Twenty thousand cubic metres of earth had been displaced.”<sup>21</sup>*

### **“He (Piero) is hoping to find someone (Satprem) who will give him the authority”**

The Mother did not allow major decisions to be taken in Roger’s absence and without his consent. This excerpt from Mother’s Agenda, on 10 November 1971, concerning Piero Cicionesi, sheds light on the controversy raised by Mother’s choice of a contractor. She asked Satprem:

*“An Auroville story.*

*Auroville? What happened?*

*A few days ago I received a letter from a young man who is an architect there, Z (I don’t know him). He wrote me saying that he would like to see me.*

<sup>20</sup> A Franciscan monk, a theologian and sociologist and influential author, Ruud Lohman turned into Matrimandir supervisor, spending the day on the scaffolding and the night at the basic Camp. He was just passing by when he noticed the Aurovilians digging the Matrimandir excavation: his resolve was immediate.

<sup>21</sup> Savitra, “Auroville the first six years”.

Ah, why?

*Because he would like to explain to me Auroville's problems. So I replied: "Auroville's problems will be solved and cleared up only when Aurovillians turn directly to Mother; and hence I wish they would go directly to the Source instead of going to an intermediary." Then I added amicably that I could nevertheless... etc.*

You did well.

*He has an idea of how to make the Matrimandir; and others have another idea, but then R. [the architect] is going to arrive soon—I would like to wait for R. to be here, and he will decide.*

*Because he wrote me a second letter, saying, "I agree that one must turn to the Source, which is the 'stable and welcoming' reference, but unfortunately one doesn't have direct access to the Source, one has to go through intermediaries...."*

(Mother nods her head)

*So there are some problems, and he has explained one of them in his letter to me.*

Tell me what it is.

*For example, he says he wrote you a month ago, in October; and you answered him in writing. He wrote you this: "I have made a detailed study of the work to be done, and I have reached the conclusion that we [Aurovillians] can take upon ourselves the responsibility for the excavation and construction work of the four pillars; then a commercial firm such as EEC [I don't know what it is, it's in Madras, I think] would agree to take over the construction of the Matrimandir itself ..., etc. It therefore appears that the work of the Aurovillians is not an obstacle to the rest of the work being handled by a specialized firm...." Then you answered, "That's very good, I am fully in agreement. The safety and solidity of the work should come BEFORE PERSONAL QUESTIONS. I am counting on you to see that everything goes harmoniously."*

And then I realized.... Afterwards, the others told me that he had written that without consulting them.

*And he tells me he did it "after consultation with about 50 Aurovillians."*

No.... Listen, those things are enough to drive anyone crazy!

*In a nutshell he wants the work to be handled by the Aurovillians, without barring the participation of experts.*

But that's how it is. It will be that way. That's what I said; but when it comes to the actual execution.... I advise you not to get involved in this!

*Oh, but I don't intend to at all!*

Yes, they're.... It's pretty complicated!

*I'll simply tell him to wait for R.'s return and that the decision will be made then.*

Yes. But the decision has been made—I don't know, I thought they were already working.

*The "official" decision is that a firm in Madras will do the work.*

Not all the work. We have asked the Aurovillians to be there—exactly as he puts it.

*Well, because he says he is ready even to undertake the foundation work for the pillars.*

Oh, no! That's.... Look, tell him that R. will soon arrive and everything will be decided when he's here.

*But I really don't want to get involved in their problems!*

Well, no!... Did you see the sentence in my letter—there are also personal questions behind. He is not saying it, but that's what it is. He's hoping to find someone (Satprem) who will give him the authority, you understand?

*Yes, I think he is.*

So just tell him what I said."

The Mother had approved Piero's proposal for the construction of the four Matrimandir pillars. But refusing that a contractor would continue the work, on 13 November 1971 Piero wrote to the Mother:

*"Shyam Sunder now tells us that the work will be executed by a contractor such as E.C.C. I am very puzzled; my sentiment is still to participate in a creative work directly in contact with matter, to transform it. ...*

*I only request you to allow me to suspend my work. This is not the direction in which I am working for the past three years in Auroville and I feel that I cannot change now, by reverting to the old position in the relationship with a contractor, which is based on money."*

The Mother replied to him:

*"Each one has good reasons to support his own opinion, and I am no expert to judge between them. But from the spiritual point of view I know that with true goodwill all opinions can be harmonised in a more comprehensive and truer solution.*

*This is what I expect from the workers of Auroville.*

*Not that some give way to others, but that on the contrary all should combine their efforts to achieve a more comprehensive and perfect result. The ideal of Auroville demands this progress – don't you want to make it?*

*Blessings"*

## **21st February 1972: the first Matrimandir concreting, preparation for the pillars**

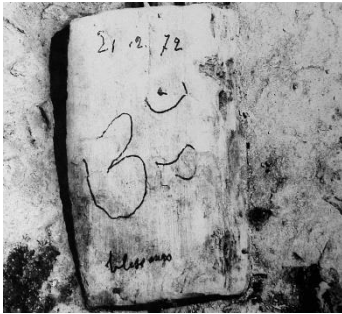
The heavy excavation work (10.50 metres deep, 50 metres across) was completed. On 21 February 1972, at sunrise, the first Matrimandir concreting took place, cementing the foundation to commence the construction of the four pillars. About two thousand people filed, putting a granite stone in the concrete mixer. At the base of the east pillar was laid the stone on which the Mother had inscribed the date, the OM symbol, her blessings and signature. She wrote this message:



*"The Matrimandir wants to be the symbol of the Universal Mother according to Sri Aurobindo's teaching".*



The large rosewood model of Matrimandir – with the disks, petals, and oval gardens – was displayed in public for the first time. The Mother named Matrimandir's North, South, East and West pillars, which support the Matrimandir's structure, after the four 'Aspects' of the Supreme Mother Sri Aurobindo describes; respectively: Mahakali, Maheshwari, Mahalakshmi, Mahasaraswati. And named the twelve meditation rooms, inside Matrimandir's twelve 'petals', after her twelve qualities: Sincerity, Humility, Gratitude, Perseverance, Aspiration, Receptivity, Progress, Courage, Goodness, Generosity, Equality, Peace.



Piero commented: *"The first concreting was in February '72. That was the real first stone, one of these pieces of petrified wood that is found somewhere in the canyon. Somebody had flattened it on one side, and Mother has signed with a beautiful 'AUM' ॐ that was afterwards photographed. We only keep the remembrance from the photograph, because the actual stone remained in the foundation. It was a nice beginning, the true beginning. It was shared by so many people, maybe 2000 people that came."*

*There was a long line of persons, and each one would take one or more stones from the pile of gravel for the concreting, and put them into the mixing machine. Each person passing in front was doing that with a different aim, a different inspiration. For some persons, to put this stone in the machine was like their whole life. For others it was just throwing in a little bit of gravel. So anyhow there was brought in a first concreting machine that was lowered down and was used for cementing this small stone in the foundation of the east pillar."*<sup>22</sup> [See att. ]



*"Today a year ago there was a grand solemnity in the heart of Auroville where nothing was to be seen yet except the banyan tree and some palmyras. Hundreds of people had gathered before sunrise to attend the laying of the first stone of the "Soul of Auroville", the Matrimandir, the Temple of Truth. It was a tremendous event, it is told, which reminded many of the Vedic times, the ancient history of India. This morning we had another grand solemnity, at sunrise. Again hundreds of people had gathered in the splendid light of the rising sun. On the hill formed by the excavated earth, twelve fires had been lit and later another great fire was lit in the centre of the crater. This time we had gathered to officially commence the next phase of the work: casting the four huge pillars which emerge from the depths up to zero level to carry the large sphere. There were twelve people, all in some way close to Mother. The group descended towards the first level at three meters depth, where they all received a stone. They walked in procession all around the excavation and then put their stone in the cement mixer. Behind them then followed the hundreds, even thousands, each contributing a pebble."*<sup>23</sup>

*"One year had passed, a year of digging and dredging until the base had been found. Now began the reascent. A concrete platform would be laid at the bottom of the pit, implanted with four arching pillars rising back to ground level to uphold the spherical superstructure of the Matrimandir, four foundation pillars exceeding 10 metres in height to support a compressed globe 36 metres wide and 29 metres*

<sup>22</sup> From "Memories of Auroville" by Janet Fearn.

<sup>23</sup> Ruud Lohman, "Matrimandir Diary".

high.”<sup>24</sup> The concreting of the Matrimandir foundation basement, on 3-4 May 1972, joined by 120 people, lasted 26 hours. The Ashram students joined at midnight. 40 tons of reinforced steel for the slab were emplaced. The concreting of the footings of the pillars, commenced on 20 May 1972, went on for eight consecutive nights, one layer/night.

*“Things have been going nicely this month of May. Suddenly work is picking up speed and it looks as if we'll get the four pillars ready by the Centenary celebration, though we'll have to work with all the energy available. And that's what is happening. Especially this month another saying of the Mother has become a fact of experience that the construction of Matrimandir will be like a festival. The first great festivals we had on May third and fourth. Between the projected pillars had been woven an enormous mat of steel rods intended to keep the four pillars interconnected and in balance by spreading and dividing the weight. This mat had to be covered with concrete all at one stretch. It started on May 3 at 4.00 p.m. Members of the Ashram would work from 4.00 to 9.00 p.m., Aspiration and other groups in Auroville from 9.00 to 3.00 a.m. and then the full-timers at Matrimandir would finish it. Immediately from 4 o'clock the real push was there. From zero-level, bags of cement, pebbles and sand are transported via a balance into the cement mixer. The mixer is standing at the three metre level. From there the cement is worked down via a chute towards the minus-ten level into the wheelbarrows. We need about thirty people for the whole process, but we had more than double the number and when at 9.00p.m. Aspiration came, three times the number. When you put down your shovel for a second someone else has snatched it away. One almost fights for work.”*<sup>25</sup>



In “Turning Points” Piero movingly describes: *“We were doing these concretings at night, and people were coming from Pondi, all enthusiastic. Ladies in white sarees bringing stones and sand to the mixer machine, or making long chains to move the concrete in the old way, with pans; (laughs) anything was possible! It was nice, and completely unexpected, because the idea was that we wanted the Aurovilians to build the Matrimandir; and then suddenly these Ashramites were coming and asking when was the next concreting, “I want to come, please, tell me before!”*

The Matrimandir Camp was built between March and August 1972. *“The camp itself, in contrast to the separate clusters of huts in Aspiration, was a single, concentrated unit – the dining area, living quarters, and meditation room being a continuum joined by walkways enclosing gardened courtyards. The walls are of brick construction, and the roof, a series of keet and bamboo waves with low sloping eaves. ... But the growing nucleus was drawn not by social affinities, but by the work. They had come to build the Matrimandir. Aspiration’s play of diversity, its exploration of the many, was here counterpoised by a concentration upon a single point an ingathering of energy toward a sole realisation. The stony of Peace and its personality is absorbed and effaced in that structure which it labours to express and which is its reason for being. The rhythms of the communal person are subtly and inseparably bound to the workings of the Matrimandir, reflecting its progressions and intensities, the periods of concretings, periods of cohesion, of coming together.”* Savitra<sup>26</sup> beautifully describes what the Camp’s atmosphere was; this was my experience too, as a volunteer cycling from Pondy to join the big concretings and resting at the Camp: one-pointed concentration, Matrimandir.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Savitra, “Auroville the first six years”.

<sup>25</sup> Ruud Lohman, “Matrimandir Diary”, 31 May 1972.

<sup>26</sup> Savitra, “Auroville the first six years”.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

## **“In principle not for visitors, reserved for Aurovilians; but not everyone will be admitted”**

Regarding the access to Matrimandir the Mother had told Satprem, on 3 January 1970:

*“But then, people will not come for ‘regular meditations’ or anything of the kind (the internal organization will be taken care of later): it will be a place for concentration. Not everyone will be allowed in; there will be a time of the week or the day (I don't know) when visitors will be allowed<sup>28</sup>, but anyway without mixture. There will be a fixed hour or day to show the visitors, and the rest of the time only for those who are... serious — serious, sincere, who truly want to learn to concentrate... Then people will be let in in order to concentrate - (laughing) to learn to concentrate! No fixed meditations, nothing of the sort, but they will have to stay there in silence - silence and concentration.”*

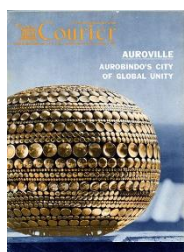
To Roger asking *“Will the Force more specially be concentrated in Matrimandir?”*, in June 1971 the Mother replied: *“The new Force works everywhere, especially in this room. You feel it, don't you? There is here a density capable of performing miracles, but few are able to feel it, to perceive it. Sri Aurobindo and I have concentrated this Force on the whole town; it is palpable, perceptible as a very concrete perfume which penetrates, but one must be able to feel it, to receive it. But no miracles as people would like to see; for them to believe, they need material proofs without which they deny. Build Matrimandir, put in place my symbol and Sri Aurobindo's and the suspended ball. I take it upon myself to make it into a very strong centre. Only those who are capable will perceive it.”<sup>29</sup>*

Access to the Chamber was restricted by Mother's will. In August 1972 Roger noted down what she told him:

*“I would like people to keep silent. It must be written there [in the Matrimandir area] that one keeps silent, in French, English and Tamil. And no music. No flowers inside. There should be a room to put them in, in a corridor.*

*In principle not for visitors, reserved for Aurovilians; but not everyone will be admitted. The first condition for those who want to go there is to ask. Those who have contributed to the construction will be admitted in the first place. If there are doubtful cases, they should be referred to me. All those who have a doubtful presence should not go. If there is the slightest doubt, the case should be presented to me. People must be known for their qualifications. One cannot leave it open. Then voluntary guardians would be needed, day and night. I think it's simplest with doors.”<sup>30</sup>*

## **With the mega-contractor, no one but the Mother and Roger would have had any saying**



Matrimandir should have been built in time for Sri Aurobindo's Centenary – as announced in a special UNESCO issue – by a large contractor, ECC; more realistically, the completion was postponed to 21.2.1978, Mother's Centenary Day. A highly specialized contractor was indispensable, to complete a building as complex and structurally demanding as Matrimandir. However, ECC had requested an initial capital of 30 lakhs to commence the works, whereas the construction of Bharat Nivas had to

<sup>28</sup> Mother's concept was that of a township without cars and polluting traffic. Only electric vehicles, with a maximum speed of 15 Km. by the hour were admitted – and bicycles. All outer traffic had to stop at the green belt's boundary. Internally, a monorail was foreseen, and electronically driven capsules underground.

<sup>29</sup> Roger Anger archive.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

be halted for two years due to the chronic lack of funds: the construction material for the Bharat Nivas was redirected to the Matrimandir... Had the ECC taken over, no one else but the Mother and her Chief Architect would have had any saying, in a contract where the Mother was the client, Roger the architect, and ECC the contractor. But this was not to be. The Mother had no choice but to accept Piero's proposal to supervise the construction site, resorting to local paid labour along with the Auroville residents and, the early years, ashramites volunteering to be ferried daily by bus.

Oscar published in the "Gazette Aurovilienne": *"On the 14th of September, the Mother gave her blessings for Aurovilians themselves to continue the construction of the Matrimandir, beyond the four foundation pillars."*<sup>31</sup> Alain Grandcolas recalled<sup>32</sup>: *"In September 1972, at a time when we were planning to complete the building of Matrimandir by February 1978 by using heavy equipments to meet the target of five years given by the Mother, we came to know that the Mother told to Roger "to entrust the building of Matrimandir to a contractor". A strong revolt erupted amongst all of us and we requested Nata, at that time the site engineer, to check the authenticity of this, for us, incredible statement. Nata came down from the Mother's room and told us: "The Mother told to entrust the construction of Matrimandir to ECC (the company that was building the Bharat Nivas at that time)". She therefore not only instructed to have the work done by a contractor, but even named the company! With my (spiritual) ego a little bit hurt, I sent Mother a letter (through Roger) expressing my concern that since the Matrimandir will be the Soul of Auroville it needs to be built by Aurovilians only and not with the help of money power, contractors and paid workers. Mother's answer was strong and firm: "Build Matrimandir, put my symbol in place and Sri Aurobindo's, and the globe. I take it upon myself to make it a very strong centre. Only those who are capable will perceive it."*

On 11 June 1972 Shyam Sunder noted down: *"The basement of Matrimandir pillars is finished. The construction of the actual pillars is to start. The work will be slow now due to lack of resources. Mother apparently did not like the slowing down."* On 14 September he wrote: *"Last midnight we have completed one pillar of Matrimandir. The other three pillars we expect to complete in six weeks. Lack of money is a big difficulty."* And the next day: *"The Madras engineers, who came to inspect the construction of the Matrimandir, have found it to be very satisfactory. Roger is going on the 20th. That day he will give further instructions at Madras."*

On 16 September 1972 Shyam Sunder added: *"Piero's letter about the next phases of the Matrimandir construction. He wants to know whether it should be continued by ourselves or by a contractor."*

Mother: What does Roger say?

Shyam Sunder: *He agrees that it be continued by Piero, preferably with the help of the Ashram engineers, if available."*

*"The work will be slow now due to lack of resources"* and *"Lack of money is a big difficulty"* determined this historical decision, born out of dire necessity. A new extraordinary adventure commenced that will shape Auroville for years to come, coalescing that heterogeneous congeries of people into a new collective being at Mother's service. Working on the Matrimandir's roof and scaffoldings was the binding force she had foreseen. Even children and teenagers joined, in the grand collective feast of the full moon concretings. Those unrepeatable years fashioned a different way to be, one in self-offering and joy. Hardly anything remains of that spirit but the proof that, those unforgettable years, a new humanity was about to be born.

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<sup>31</sup> Vol. 2, No 2 issue (October 1972).

<sup>32</sup> Alain Grandcolas, News & Notes 22 April 2006.





*"In two and a half hours the Centenary [of Sri Aurobindo] will be here. I have never known a day lived towards so intensively as tomorrow. People expect all kinds of things. "August 15th" has long been a mystical date after which, in fact, nothing will come any more. A bit like the magical year 2000. Many are expecting miracles. The beginning of a new creation. The return of Sri Aurobindo in our midst. Sri Aurobindo's appearance on the Darshan balcony, together with Mother. The conquest of all our weaknesses and human imperfections. The breakthrough of the new being. But that would be conjuring, not a new creation and a new man, one would say. I have a strong feeling that the stress is not on the day of tomorrow as much as on the days, months, years after it. As if it is now getting serious. As if the time of hanging on is over and we now have to put our hands to it. It will not be so nice any more, it won't be a holiday camp any more, not a place for superficial freedom and for pleasures which have not yet become joys. The transformation of man and matter looks like a laborious work and not something of one day. It is again typical of this yoga that we inaugurate the Centenary with work. We are having a concreting now, with the help of the Ashram. Starting at 8 this evening we will be ready just before midnight. At exactly 12 o'clock five fires will be lit on the three-metre level after which we'll have a half-hour meditation. The four pillars are not completed for the Centenary, but we are almost half-way which means that it will take another two months, especially because higher up it becomes more difficult. The second level of two pillars has been cast and we are at this moment casting the second layer of the North pillar. It has been a silent day today; as if everything and everybody is closer to the source of his being. Becoming quiet is the great art. Then only can we hear It and Him and Her. 15 August 1972 Sri Aurobindo's 100th Birth Anniversary."*<sup>33</sup>

## **20 September 1972: Roger accepts the major structural changes Piero suggests**

In the interview "Turning Points" Piero Cicionesi confessed: *"I would have liked a closer relationship with Mother, but it never happened. And after all, she had that only with a few selected people."*

<sup>33</sup> Ruud Lohman, "Matrimandir Diary", 14 August 1972.

A short digression is essential to grasp the hidden link assembling together so diverse personalities; as if the Mother, before the architects, saw the art-soul.<sup>34</sup> 100% structural engineering, this is the task she had assigned to Piero, Udar conveyed to him; and in this, surely Piero excelled. Yet in his youth Piero painted delicate watercolours of classic Italian architecture; and I remember, when I joined Auroville in 1985, being shown delicate painting of landscapes and nudes by Piero's alter-ego, shily popping up. His friend Paolo Tommasi (designer, interior decorator, costumier, jeweller) painted too; a flamboyant personality emerges out of the books that Paolo, introverted and reserved, gifted me about his creations. Filling the whole spectrum as an architect, painter and sculptor, from extremely refined to explosive, Roger Anger was another. 'Unity in diversity' – Matrimandir as starting point?

Recollecting his services, Piero explained:

*"For 21 years, from 1971 till 1992, I have dedicated my professional skills to the design and construction of Matrimandir. My activities began simply as a site engineer, guiding unskilled, voluntary Aurovilians and local workers during the excavation and foundation stages. Unexpectedly, however, my responsibilities became far more complex. As an architect with a background in structural engineering I found myself in a crucial position to help resolve a lot of structural and architectural issues, that, at the time, were still pending or vague. I collaborated, other than with Roger, with a young engineer from the Structural Engineering Research Centre (S.E.R.C), Chennai, Mr. Santhanam, who was in charge of the static calculations of the Matrimandir."*<sup>35</sup>

*"In the middle of 1971 Dr. Chaman Lal Gupta, from the Ashram, proposed to assign the structural design of Matrimandir to a prestigious Central Government institution based in Chennai, the Structural Engineering Research Centre (SERC). A contract was soon signed and the assignment lasted several years and was fulfilled mainly by a brilliant young engineer, Mr. T.K. Santhanam.*

*A young student of architecture educated at the Ashram's Centre of Education, Ranajit Gupta, was asked to make a full set of drawings which were given to the engineers at the end of September 1971. Unfortunately, the architectural design proposed by Roger was not finding an easy structural solution. Major points of difficulties were: the 4 ramps and the slab of the Chamber's floor which was designed to look like 4 floating petals. Roger was upset by the various arrangements proposed by the engineers. In his words: "with crucial changes the architectural impact would be lost". Early 1972 the structural design was drifting between exchange of letters and meetings, without a solution in sight.*

*In this period I found Roger in a different mood than before and one day we discussed seriously about the situation. Suddenly, it came to me that, by coming closer to Udar's original drawing, which he had done as per Mother's instructions, it would be easier to find a solution. I said this to Roger and, immediately after, made three suggestions to this end: 1) let there be only two ramps, starting from the second level and arriving in the ribs at the same level as the Chamber; 2) let the dodecagonal wall surround the Chamber but not the space below it, and 3) let the floor of the Chamber be continuous. I waited a few seconds for Roger's response: these proposals were touching important aspects of his design and I was not sure about his reaction. His response was unexpectedly positive: "Oui, pourquoi pas!..." (Yes, why not!...). It was a very intense moment: for Matrimandir and for us all as these were very major modifications.*

*Roger liked the three proposals, especially to have the dodecagonal wall and the entire Chamber as a sort of "suspended structure" within the sphere. From below, one would now contemplate the curved sphere (what later became the inner skin) and see fully the two spiralling ramps – surely a beautiful experience. I was also happy because, unexpectedly, thanks to the engineers' objections, the Chamber was coming back*

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<sup>34</sup> Piero Cicionesi: <https://auctions.milleabros.com/lots/view/1-5EMEF0/piero-cicionesi-8-architectural-watercolors>

Paolo Tommasi: <https://www.mutualart.com/Artist/Paolo-Tommasi/A77B820D837E05FD/AuctionResults>

Roger Anger: <https://centredart.in/project/roger-anger-lartiste/>

<sup>35</sup> <https://auroville.org/page/piero-and-gloria>

to the simplicity of what Mother had “seen” and described to Udar. In December 1972 the new set of drawings was finalised. Roger had them done by the person he trusted most, “papa” Richardet. They were then handed and explained to the engineers.

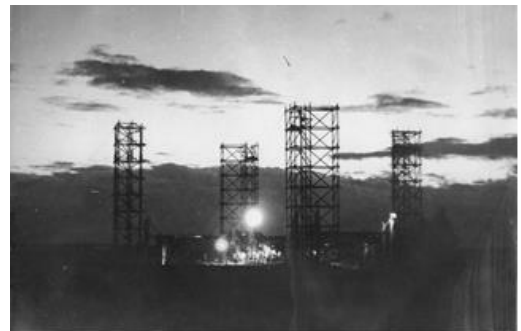
Of course, having already worked for a year on the previous design SERC’s engineers were all but happy about these very major modifications. But with an extraordinary composure, controlling their irritation, they wrote to us only the following essential comment: “...it can be noted that every major structural member has been altered to a great extent: all of the designs done earlier have to be completely recast.” After that the structural design took a fresh momentum and was completed without encountering any other unsolvable problems.”<sup>36</sup>

“Consultancy for the structural design was graciously given by Dr. T.K. Santhanam of SERC (Structural Engineering Research Centre), Chennai. The detailed construction drawings, the design and fabrication of the staging and shuttering, as well as the overall organisation and execution of the construction, were done by the Aurovilians under the guidance of Piero.

Construction of the sphere started with the erection of a steel-pipe scaffolding, anchored on the foundation. The scaffolding reached a height of ten metres to support the 400-ton weight of the first slab of the sphere. Wooden scaffolding and temporary towers for hoisting had to be erected on the four pillars. Steel mountings to hold the discs planned for covering the outer surface of the finished structure had also to be fixed in a regular pattern.

Then came the concreting for the first slab, which went on without rain interruption for six days during the peak of the monsoon season. It was completed at the Western pillar summit at 7.25 p.m. on the 17th of November 1973, in perfect weather.”<sup>37</sup>

The concreting of the first slab joining the four pillars that support the Matrimandir’s structure was done between 11 and 14 November 1973. The tips of the pillars (eight small triangular pieces above the first slab) had to be added. Piero recalled: “It so happened that we just cast the last tip of the fourth and last pillar on the same day and in the same hour that Mother left her body. So it was symbolically the completion of the four aspects of the Mother that were cast into concrete.”



The Mother entered mahasamadhi on 17th November 1973 at 7:25pm.

*The Mother's Shrine*  
the Matrimandir wants to be the  
symbol of the Universal Mother according  
to Sri Aurobindo's teaching

<sup>36</sup> <https://auromaa.org/matrimandir-honoring-piero-cicionesi-pt-1/>

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.archinomy.com/case-studies/matrimandir-auroville/>

## Epilogue from "Memories of Auroville"<sup>38</sup>

**Piero:** We were then engaged in a major construction, which actually kept me busy for another 18 years. There were natural talents that were showing up, and were taking the job quite seriously. I think we were quite fortunate, and in these cases I don't think that you have to teach anyone. I think actually the best is not to teach anybody, because if we start teaching, people pretend to know, and then it's even worse. It's better to let things happen, and then, slowly guiding, watching, and being there the whole time, to explain exactly the small steps that have to be done. It's more effective, and then later people start to grasp the whole of the work. Then it becomes easier, as they can start to read the drawing, and start to understand more.

**Michael T:** What Piero said earlier about supposedly intelligent people in this huge construction, we never saw it that way, because it was never like concrete, and so we put steel on top of the concrete, and it was almost only when we were half way up that we began to realize what we had built. There was never the feeling that we were undertaking this huge building, because I think for many of us, we never saw what the thing would become. We'd seen the model of the galaxy, with this thing with drawing pins on it in the middle, the beautiful model that Roger had made of the galaxy. But none of us really knew what we were building.

I left Matrimandir in '79 and went into other things, and when I came back a few years later, and tried to climb up where I used to work, hanging on by one hand out in space, it blew my mind. But when you'd reach that point by every day going up a little bit, you never realize how high you are. So, the building was like that. None of us realized what we were doing, because it was a day-to-day thing. There was never any question of why, or we're not qualified to do that. Of course we were qualified, if someone says to tie the ends of steel in this shape, any one of us could do it.

**Piero:** Here it's very hot and for the benefit of the concrete, not for the benefit of the workers, it's better to do the concreting at night. We were in need of labour for the night work, so we were sending word around, and even from Pondicherry we got such a beautiful response. Many people were coming at six o'clock when we started, and they were working till one or two o'clock in the morning. For this huge concreting in the foundation, when the work was lasting many, many hours, sometimes we had a hundred or maybe a hundred and fifty persons working with the spot-light, and clamping it down, and then going and running around with the wheel-barrow. It was a nice atmosphere, full of enthusiasm.

**Michael T:** The workers had worked all day long, you must remember. Then they'd go and have a cup of tea, and then have 8 hours of concreting. That was the way it used to be.

**Larry:** I mostly remember this experience of putting the concrete beams on, when we were working late; it was never a feeling of we're going to build this building. As Michael said it was what was going to be done that day with whoever was there. That was another very interesting thing. We had crews that Piero trained, it was kind of like somebody learned from him, and then passed it on. The crews would change completely from one day to the next. And that was a very beautiful thing, because we would be all sorts of people, and it always seemed to work. This is coming from somebody, who was just working on a daily basis. That was incredibly beautiful. And then especially when we had these concretings, and everybody would come, and it would go on through the night. There's nothing I've ever done before or after, that can compare to the joy of participating in things like that.

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<sup>38</sup> A book by the late pioneer Janet Fearn interviewing Aurovilians who lived here between 1968 and 1973.



**Piero:** In those early times, the team on site was not really big; it was mainly meant to prepare the work for the concreting, so we were preparing the steel and the shuttering work. For the shuttering wood work, I was counting on a team of local carpenters, because the work was more specialized, and it was not easy to get Aurovilians doing that. So, with that in mind, maybe there were on-site 30 or 40 people, not more than that.

On the days of the concreting, which was normally once a week, or a little bit longer when it was necessary, we were using a hundred people, or a hundred and twenty people. One of the essential things was not to get rain during the concreting, so that was always the challenge during the monsoon time. What do we do now? We would look at the sky, maybe in the morning it would rain, and now what to do? And then people were running to the Ashram, and sending the message to the Mother. "We are concreting today; give us a day without rain." And in fact, we have always been able to avoid major problems, or any problem with rain. It's remarkable, especially when we were doing concreting for the foundation. In certain cases we have worked for 24 hours and more, continuously.

This period here was also important, because we were keeping a thread with the Mother. The construction was going on, but on the day of the concreting, suddenly, we were in the blessing of the Mother. There was a bunch of flowers coming, somebody from the Ashram was coming and was bringing things that were sent by Mother to go into the concreting. That was the sort of thread there was. Actually I always felt like the Mother was following the construction much more than the chief architect. She was there when the concreting was done. We were perceiving that more concretely than anything else in small things like these small blessings packets. They were so sweet, arriving at the right moment.

They were passed almost secretly. This has been sent by Mother, and she wants you to put this in the concrete. And then we were doing that at the right moment without ceremony. It was just there happening.

**Michael T:** The experience, particularly in '72, which was Sri Aurobindo's centenary, was so powerful that, when people asked how we could work in those environments, it was grace to work in those environments. There was no suffering involved, it was a total grace.

**Larry:** It was a total grace. But also for me, because I was just beginning then to get an understanding of, and involved in, the yoga of Sri Aurobindo, for me it was a real introduction to karma yoga in a very physical sense, which was a very important thing for me to learn in such a magical situation. I'm very grateful.

