

Fair Observer^o

Burning Man and Auroville: Understanding the Human Condition

By William Softky • Apr 28, 2019



Burning Man 2015 © BLM Nevada

Burning Man and Auroville offer a glimpse into the souls of the US and India respectively, and a better understanding of the human condition.

Since the fall from the real garden of Eden, what some scientists call Paleo Paradise, humans have had trouble living together in peace. So, we dream of ideal societies and try to construct them on purpose. Such utopias take two forms, depending on how long they're expected to last.

At the temporary end are escapes like parties and festivals, and at the long-term end "intentional communities" like kibbutzim and communes. A well-known example of the first is the annual week-long psychedelic party in Nevada's bleak Black Rock desert, the sex-drugs-rock-n-roll-machinery-art festival known as Burning Man. The most successful long-term example is Auroville in South India, over 50 years old, inspired by a Gandhi-like guru named Sri Aurobindo, blessed unanimously by the United Nations and reforested from scratch on a barren patch of red dirt. I'm lucky to have visited both Burning Man and Auroville, and would like to share the flavor of each, along with what does and doesn't work, and why.

SIMILAR PLACES, DIFFERENT LOCATIONS

The failure modes of utopias, but especially their successes, matter a lot to humankind right now. Worldwide, depression and suicide are up. The more technology presses in, the more get-away-from-it-all escapes can help make sense of life. Burning Man aims at a peak resonance experience, a big bang; Auroville at continuous, ongoing resonance, a steady thrum. Both succeed, both are becoming corrupted by money, both have immediate potential to transform the world, and both are sponsored, in part, by billionaires who want to make a difference. Utopia might seem silly to some, but getting it right is the best and maybe only chance we have left. It helps to study any utopias that almost work.

My own perspective matters here. I grew up in Silicon Valley, the land of cults and startups. Like other inhabitants of the valley, I made the pilgrimage to Burning Man, where I've "burned" seven times. This year, I made my way to India to visit family and to fulfill two more motivations: receive authentic advice on Ayurvedic medicine and visit Svaram in Auroville, the world center of vibrational healing. Visiting Svaram and meeting its founder, Aurelio, was important to me because the focus of my biophysics research is vibrational healing. I certainly didn't come to Auroville thinking of Burning Man.

But from the outset, the physical similarities between Burning Man and Auroville were immediately obvious. Both are laid out in circles with diameters of 3 kilometers, their perimeter guarded and fenced, their wide-open central circles filled with celebration, bonfires and worship focused on a massive, artistic structures built dead-center of both circles. Additionally, both are flat, hot and dry, unpaved, dusty, crisscrossed by bikes and noisy smoking vehicles. Outside the central common area, habitats are divided into quirky self-governing communes, called "theme camps" at Burning Man and "settlements" in Auroville, each shaded and decorated by geometric fabric tarps, awnings and artworks — all visually countercultural. In both places, here and there viewing towers rise above the flats.

The people living in both Auroville and Burning Man are generous and kind, and prone to wearing practical, desert-wear like dust masks, headscarves and flowing cotton drapes. Many go by unusual single names, honorifics given specially for the place. Both locations offer far too many healthy daily activities for any one person to consume: yoga, dance, discussions, myriad hippie-style workshops such as dancing, breathing, massaging, meditating, "healing," chanting and relating.

Both places are hard to get into and, as a result, are filled with enthusiastic people who pay money and work hard to be there. They are both full of like-minded souls who want to be around each other. Burning Man and Auroville "work" as real-world utopias, but that's where the resemblance ends.

THE AMERICAN ESSENCE OF BURNING MAN

Burning Man is a giant party, as temporary and unsustainable as can be. It is a raucous art-and-noise festival on a desert lakebed, caked with antiseptic lye-laced dust, which is rinsed clean by rain each winter and blown into opaque yellow clouds each summer by hurricane-force winds and dust-storms every afternoon. Burning Man is named after the huge ceremonial burning effigy of "the Man," an abstract wooden human form 25-meters tall that visually anchors the center of Black Rock City, day and night.



Burning Man 2015 © BLM Nevada

Apart from the Man, the Burning Man festival also burns much of its garbage, such as paper plates and most large wooden structures, instead of taking them apart and dragging them home. Taking things back home is inconvenient and, besides, burning them is fun. And Burning Man burns literally tons of fossil fuel in vehicles to get to and from the desert, and generators to fuel sound, light, art and parties, day and night, all taking far more energy than simply staying home. At its peak, Burning Man is filled with 70,000 close-packed partygoers, making it a blasted, giant, over-lit refugee camp — Mad Max meets Las Vegas.

The difficulty of getting in and living there is part of the point. Commerce “on-playa” isn’t allowed. You have to bring everything yourself, food and water included, everything except portable latrines, the only thing provided. And you have to carry out all your trash, down to every scrap of lint. The injunction “leave no trace” is taken religiously. There are no garbage cans, on purpose, to enforce personal responsibility for trash. That eco-consciousness is ironic when set against the overall indulgence and wastefulness of the festival as a whole.

A group of would-be “burners” needs weeks or months of preparation to assemble and haul enough food, water, shade-structure, generators, fuel, decorations and, especially, party supplies to not only survive, but also thrive. Burners need provisions on a flat, harsh, hostile plain to survive and to make their camp attractive enough to pull in fellow souls. Entertaining others is the goal of almost everyone.

Apart from logistical barriers, the \$500 entry tickets keep out riff-raff. By rigorously checking tickets, the security station keeps out anyone without tickets. With its hours-long wait, invasive vehicle searches for stowaways, and ever-spinning radar and night-vision coverage of the surrounding open plain that is capable of spotting jackrabbits miles away, those without tickets have little chance of sneaking in. Getting into Burning Man is an all-or-nothing affair and the whole thing reeks of Checkpoint Charlie. Yet once inside you’re free to do practically anything, the ultimate dream of the American West, ironically made possible by enforcement emulated from the Eastern Block.

Go naked. Get drunk. Make noise. Do drugs. Burn your stuff. Create giant fireballs, with permission of course, so that people don't get hurt. Drive or be driven in giant rolling structures —“art cars” whose purpose is to look nothing like vehicles — or even ride your bike. The roads, or rather the portions of hardened dust marked off with sticks and signs that pretend-play at roads, form a regular radial grid: concentric circular ring-roads labeled A through K or so, and spokes named in 30-minute, clock-face increments. This leads to weird-sounding appointments, such as “I'll see you at 4:30 and F at 6:00.” It also leads to cognitive dissonance if you return in subsequent years, because the streets remains the same while the locations of landmark camps shift.

The regular road infrastructure and the banks of portable toilets every few hundred meters is all that your \$500 ticket buys. That fierce, capital-intensive individualism, an American specialty, drives Burning Man. It is home-built entertainment to the extreme. Groups build and bring giant art, climbing structures, roller-discos and dance domes. Hundreds of homemade bars enthusiastically serve free drinks all day and night. During the day, one might roam by bike across the wide-open center, stumbling across unexpected weird constructions, or friends you didn't expect to see. At night, the roads are choked with dust, kicked up by people wearing elaborate furry, fuzzy, blinky costumes and their decorated bikes. Burning Man is the ultimate privatized party with everyone dedicated to grabbing each other's attention.

The density, flashiness and amplified sound ramp up all week to a pinnacle on Saturday night, when The Man burns in a frenzy of fire-dance, whooping and hollering. This is the week-long party at its craziest, even as Black Rock City starts disassembling itself for the long drive home. Burning Man is so temporary, it celebrates its own demise.

While many burners are spiritual people, only one place on the playa is built for spirituality: the Temple. This is an ornate walk-in sculpture, different each year, half a kilometer beyond the Man in the wide open desert. People move reverently in the Temple, pinning pictures of departed loved ones or scrawling messages to them on its walls, sighing and crying in escape from the overstimulation all around. When the Temple burns the Sunday after, roaring and crackling as its embers soar upwards, one hears no whoops and hollers, only hush.

THE INDIAN SPIRIT OF AUROVILLE

The Temple offers spiritual solace in Burning Man, but it is banished both physically and psychologically to the periphery. In Auroville, quiet spirituality radiates from its center and has kept it alive for 50 years.

Auroville is named after Sri Aurobindo, an Indian sage who celebrated human unity. He was a contemporary of Gandhi, a fellow revolutionary who was jailed by the British. A disciple of his, a Frenchwoman now revered as the Mother, proposed a pan-human city in his name. Newly-independent India provided 20 square kilometers of hot eroded dirt, and the United Nations did the cheerleading. Several hundred altruistic volunteers began reforesting the place by hand, living on the shadeless, waterless plain not just for weeks as in Burning Man, but for years. Now the millions of trees they planted cool the place, and machines dispense free drinking water. Cookware isn't burnable plastic and paper, but indestructible stainless steel.

Entry into Auroville is free to visitors, but not to their vehicles. Only local motorbikes and tuk-tuks, locally known as autos, ply Auroville's dusty roads, which are allegedly arrayed in regular spirals like a galaxy. In practice, these roads curve almost randomly, making the place difficult for newcomers to navigate, but also making it seem larger and more mysterious than it is. Few signs show where you are, and none show distances. With fewer straight sightlines than Burning Man, 20-fold fewer people and lots of trees, Auroville's residential portions are a mix of modest mansions. Modernist concrete structures and quaint creative communes lie semi-hidden in a scrubby forest as sprawling estates of faded luxury.

Auroville's reputation for environmental technology has grown alongside its forests. It now leads the way in permaculture, water management, solar energy and similar conservation techniques. The stream of tourists, housed and fed, provide steady revenue. Tourists also buy — and Auroville exports — fancy clothes, soaps, oils, incense, handicrafts and (my favorite) sonic instruments. The Aurovillian settlement called Svaram invents and deploys the most beautiful and beautiful-sounding chimes, bells, gongs and rattles used in the therapy called “sound healing.”

Svaram was why I came to Auroville: to understand its most potent products, techniques and philosophy. Long discussions with Svaram founder Aurelio confirmed my professional instincts about why sound healing works. In a simple neuromechanical view, the body is a big wad of jelly, whose jiggles the brain wants to control minutely. But tuning a jiggle-managing brain needs pure vibrations as reference signals, just like tuning a violin needs a pure pitch. Svaram makes pure sources of three-dimensional vibrations to stimulate the entire body, not just the ears: continuous thrums like singing bowls for pure centerless pitch, chimes and rattles for sudden spots in spacetime. When people relax into such a sonic soup, letting the sound wash over them, their nervous systems recalibrate. At least that's what biophysics predicts, and what people say.



Auroville © Vikram Ramakrishnan

Back to Auroville. More than half the people in Auroville at any given time are Europeans, mostly speaking French. After all, it was a French colony till 1954. During four days, my wife and I heard only one American voice besides our own. The rest of the people are Indians, mostly servants, and mostly living outside Auroville. Although there is a place called “African Pavilion,” I didn't see a single African. I did, however, meet a native Aurovillian, a man about my age, born in Auroville in 1968. Nothing else proves sustainability like happy second-generation natives.

South India is a conservative place. There is not only no nudity, but there are barely bared shoulders, leaving the clothing a mix of saris, buttoned shirts and flowing hippie cotton. Among the Europeans, thin, middle-aged women dominate, often in pairs, a natural demographic for the myriad yoga workshops, other spiritual activities and organic meals. The food is safe to eat, but, unlike on the Playa, the dust is not safe to breathe, since it contains pulverized fecal matter from cows and dogs. I almost died from pneumonia caused by dust like that before, so I know the dust-masks people wear are health precautions.

Auroville has no bars at all, little if any alcohol or drugs, not many lights and barely any music. The place is dead at night, except for quiet workshops here and there, and even those are difficult to find in the dark. Auroville is quiet on purpose, and it even has signs asking people to be silent or speak slowly.

Auroville does have one especially attractive kind of drug. But it can't be bought with money, only with the common human currencies of planning, time and effort. This "drug" involves not chemicals, but human proximity. I've tasted it three times. They call it "the divine"; I call it human resonance. A modest form can happen when a few dozen people in a quiet room, led by an expert choir-master, sing or hum a simple, meaningless tone in unison or harmony. In such acoustic synchrony, the vibrations of an individual's vocal chords synch with those of the chest, spine and ears, and then with those of others nearby, and thereby with *their* bodies too. Without the distractions of words, a whole group of people can fall into sympathetic vibration, spontaneously and organically. It feels amazing.

SILENCE AND THE SENSES

Auroville's most potent form of resonance takes place in the central meditation (aka "concentration") space, and entry is by reservation only. That circular room, inside the enormous 24k gold-covered ball called the Matrimandir, is luminously white, open carpet encircled by tall marble walls and columns, centered on a huge glass sphere, skewered and illuminated by a vertical shaft of sunlight from above. It is a central, physical, geometrical image of divine perfection. Everyone sitting sees the same view and hears the same silence, cherishing the kind of togetherness that can only be spoiled by words. Fifteen minutes of that silence feels like eternity. No wonder people go back, and back again, to sip from the divine.

That silent experience involves the same neuromechanical mechanisms as Svaram's sound healing, except in this case the resonating sources are not gongs but fellow humans, engaging frequencies from infrasonic to ultrasonic. These are not too far off from the potent silences shared at the Temple at Burning Man, silences that also move people to tears. Harnessing those silences will be the key to reinvigorating these utopias.

Auroville, of course, could reduce ambient engine noise toward electric levels and below, and could limit distracting mobile phones, the most anti-spiritual form of technology in existence, by far. At the other extreme, noisy Burning Man would be improved in proportion to how it protects and enlarges zones of dark and silence, twin foundations of any paleo sensory diet. At present, Burning Man's attention-grabbing economy and amplification-heavy technology drive native desert silence into hiding, leaving quiet human togetherness off the table. I fantasize about "Quiet Man," with the motto "Leave No Trace, Nor Sound Nor Light."

Burning Man and Auroville were both founded on principles and practices of human togetherness and autonomy. Both goals are being undermined, inexorably, by technologies that come between humans. In the case of Burning Man, these are technologies of blaring sound and hyper-flickering, hyper-colored LED displays. In Auroville's case, wireless interruptions and miscommunications are fracturing live human connection. The good news is that once leaders and sponsors in these places come to understand how humans really interact, they'll rewrite rules around solid neuromechanical principles, and make the utopian experience really sing.

In fact, all of India might follow the same track. Over three weeks, I focused my neuromechanical lens on all kinds of experiences between Chennai and Puducherry. The Aurvedic self-massage prescribed for me using slippery thick oils turned out to be an ultimately delicious and transformative experience, even without the sleep and diet tricks. The high-speed, high-stakes traffic dance of interweaving buses, cabs and motorbikes; the throngs of chattering schoolchildren; the high-fiving strangers; the sight of friends walking and laughing close by, hand on shoulder or arm in arm; and rich ladies lunching in a fancy fashion café are abiding vignettes in my memory.

Those high-bandwidth sensorimotor interactions are what the human species needs everywhere — not just in India. And they are what is missing from the Western world. If India could just ignore the receding mirage of software wealth and refocus on its ancient core of human vibration, it might yet set the example the world needs: more of Auroville.