

MAKING AUROVILLE ACCESSIBLE

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SUMMARY

The city of Auroville, conceptualized as an ideal township based on human unity in diversity, invites participation from all people of goodwill. It falls short however, with regard to accessibility. Most of the roads, buildings and public spaces are difficult to negotiate not only by the old and infirm, but also by the disabled. In its early years, the nature of its pioneering work saw to it that most Aurovilians were young and able-bodied. Little or no thought was given to the persons with disabilities (PwDs). Today, a significant number of Auroville's population is over 60, making it increasingly urgent to consider the needs of those who, temporarily or permanently, are disabled.

Awareness of the need to do something has been growing over the years. In 2001, under the auspices of the Asia-Urbs project, a proposal to make Auroville 'barrier-free' was considered, but, it did not materialize. It was not until October 2009, that the first workshop to make Auroville accessible was conducted. *Samarthyam*, a civil society and research organization working towards making buildings, public spaces and transportation systems accessible, conducted workshops towards this goal.

The first workshop comprised of three parts. In the first part, basic concepts were clarified. The need for "universal access" to 'create and maintain environments wherein people can participate in ways which are equitable and dignified, maximize independence, conserve energy, are safe and affordable' was stressed. The wider user-group it serves was emphasized- not only PwDs, but anybody with reduced mobility. To drive home the point, simulation exercises were carried out. For example, a blindfold walk in the Town Hall brought home to many participants what vision impairments feels like.

The second part of the workshop focused on the technical aspects of accessibility and how architects and engineers could tackle these issues. Barrier-free access involves more than constructing a ramp or an accessible toilet. Emphasis was placed on considering accessible design holistically, including the need for signage, anti-skid flooring, lighting, colour contrasts and emergency evacuation routes.

The final part of the workshop involved Samarthyam's access auditors (two in wheelchairs), conducting an accessibility audit of key public buildings including the famous Matrimandir.

While Auroville was making some efforts towards creating accessible environments these were found to be insufficient. Samarthyam recommended that all public buildings and guest houses in Auroville be made barrier-free and in each 'community' at least two ground floor living spaces should be made fully accessible. A subsequent Access for All campaign with the motto "Accessible Auroville" in 2011 by Samarthyam marked the beginning of a comprehensive inclusive urban development strategy. Codes specifying what should be done in all public buildings in Auroville to ensure full accessibility need to be framed and implemented by the department-in-charge.

As a result of the campaign, Auroville architects have taken up the motto "we start today". Access regulations for public buildings and large blocks of apartments are being drawn up and put into practice. This commendable movement towards universal accessibility is in keeping with Auroville's vision.

Key words: universal access; advocacy; implementation; enforcement

1. INTRODUCTION

The city of Auroville located in South India, in the State of Tamil Nadu, conceptualized as a universal township based on human unity in diversity invites participation from all people of goodwill. On 28th February 1968, some 5,000 people assembled at the centre of the future township for an inauguration ceremony attended by representatives of 124 nations, including all the States of India. Aurovilians come from 45 nations, are of all age groups (from infancy to over eighty), social classes, backgrounds and cultures, representing humanity as a whole. The population of the township is constantly growing, but currently stands at around 50,000 people, approximately one-third of them are Indians [Auroville, 2012].

2. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

In terms of physical development, Auroville aims to become a model of the 'city of the future' or 'the city the earth needs'. It wants to exhibit to the world that future realizations in all fields of work will allow building beautiful cities where people will want to live in harmony. It falls short however, with regard to accessibility. Most of the roads, buildings and public spaces are inaccessible, difficult to negotiate and are unfriendly not only for the old and infirm, but also for the disabled. In its early years, the nature of the pioneering work saw to it that most Aurovilians were young and able-bodied. Little or no thought was given to the aging population and persons with disabilities (PwDs). Today, a significant number of Auroville's population is over 60, making it increasingly urgent to consider the needs of those who, temporarily or permanently, are disabled.

3. METHODOLOGY

Samarthyam, a civil society and research organization, working towards making buildings, public spaces and transportation systems accessible, conducted training workshops towards making India fully accessible for the PwDs and persons with reduced mobility (senior citizens, families with young children, temporarily ill, persons carrying heavy luggage, etc.). The focus of Samarthyam is advocacy for universal accessibility and implementation of access standards in the Asia Pacific region.

3.1 Planning

In 2001, under the auspices of the Asia-Urbs project, a proposal to make Auroville 'barrier-free' was considered. However, it did not materialize due to lack of understanding of access standards, unavailability of resource persons and weak enforcement of building codes/regulations.

In 2008, a group of access advocates (comprised of non-disabled and disabled members) in Auroville contacted Samarthyam to draft building codes with access standards for Auroville; carry out access audits of key public buildings; and, conduct capacity building training for Auroville's architects and planners. Samarthyam collaborated with the group to design a road map for accessible Auroville with an action oriented approach to make street and pedestrian infrastructure, cycle paths and public buildings accessible for the elderly and PwDs.

3.2 Capacity-Building Workshops

In 2009, the first workshop to make Auroville accessible was conducted by Samarthyam. This workshop comprised of three parts:

In the first part, basic concepts of barrier free environment, accessibility and universal design were clarified. The need for "universal access" to "create and maintain environments wherein people can participate in ways which are equitable and dignified, maximize independence, conserve energy, are safe and affordable" was stressed. The wider user-group it serves was emphasized- not only PwDs, but anybody with reduced mobility. To drive home the point, simulation exercises (disability experience and barrier identification) were carried out.



Fig 1: Simulation exercise of Vision Impairment to Identify Barriers

For example, a blindfold walk in the Town Hall brought home to many participants what people with vision impairments feels like. Similarly, a group of practicing architects used manual wheelchairs around the building and tried using café, washrooms, library, etc.

The second part of the workshop focused on the technical aspects of accessibility and how architects and engineers could tackle these issues. A presentation on access laws and regulations in India and their implementation strategies was made. The Article 9 on “Accessibility” of United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities [UNCRPD, 2008] and its requirement to plan, design and implement accessibility standards in all private and public infrastructure and buildings was reinforced. It was stressed that barrier-free access involves more than constructing a ramp or an accessible toilet. Emphasis was placed on considering accessible design holistically, including the need for signage, way finding cues including tactile pavers for persons with vision impairments, anti-skid flooring, lighting, colour contrasts and emergency evacuation routes.



Fig 2: Capacity building training workshop

The final part of the workshop involved Samarthyam access auditors (two in wheelchairs), conducting accessibility audit of the Matrimandir, the Town Hall, Sadhana Forest, Solar Kitchen and Bharat Nivas across the city. The management and architects of each building/site were involved in the audit.



Fig 3: Architects and urban planners during access audit of Town Hall



Fig 4: Access audit of Bharat Niwas by Samarthyam

3.2.1 Access audit findings

The most challenging of all the audited buildings was Matrimandir due to its complex architecture and reluctance of the management to provide lifts and/or ramps for the Inner Chamber.

- At Matrimandir, a steep slope and a flight of steps marks the entrance to the Chamber. 'People Mover'- vehicle is available to drop visitors till the steps, however these are not wheelchair friendly.
- Lifting chairs are available for wheelchair users to be lifted manually on the steps. However, the process of transfer, lifting on the steps and then further transfers on the way to Inner Chamber is cumbersome, risky and could be painful to not only PwDs but also to the carers/attendants.
- It is unsafe and difficult to lift the chair with PwD in the spiral staircase.



Fig 5: Lifting chairs are cumbersome and risky for PwDs and their attendants

The access audit findings and recommendations of all the buildings access audited were shared with urban planners and architects through presentations. A detailed discussion was held with them to retrofit old buildings with accessible elements. A code of practice for all the new and under construction buildings in Auroville with non-negotiable and essential access standards was also established. Samarthyam recommended that all public buildings and guest houses in Auroville be made barrier-free and in each 'community' at least two ground floor living spaces should be made fully accessible.

3.2.2 Access for All Campaign

While Aurovilians were making some efforts towards creating accessible environments these were found to be insufficient. In 2011, Samarthyam worked with access advocates to launch the "Access for All" campaign in Auroville with the motto "Accessible Auroville". Series of awareness raising and capacity building workshops were organized. Meetings with urban planners and French designers to were held to design inclusive cycle paths and street infrastructure. Access audits of key guest houses, Savitri Bhawan and Visitors' Centre were conducted and reports were sent to the concerned departments. Visits to under construction public buildings revealed that most of these buildings still fall short of access features required. Under the auspices of this campaign, mass awareness on benefits of universal access was stressed. Open community meetings were held to make the campaign a big success.



Fig 6: "Access for All" campaign team in Auroville

4. RESULTS

Access audits and the advocacy campaign by Samarthyam marked the beginning of a comprehensive inclusive urban development strategy. Several multi-stakeholders meetings were held to draft, adopt, strictly implement and enforce the access standards. Building codes complying with Model Building Bye-laws by the Ministry of

Urban Development, Government of India [Agrawal, 2010], specifying what should be done in all public buildings in Auroville to ensure full accessibility were framed and are to be implemented by the department-in-charge. The Access Code thus drafted by the urban planners of Auroville in co-ordination with Samarthyam comprised of the following:

- Ramps at all gates- entry & exit
- Handrails on steps and ramps
- Signage supplemented with Braille and pictograms
- Lift/ramp for multi-storey buildings
- All doors – minimum 900mm wide
- Anti skid flooring
- Accessible drinking water unit
- Unisex accessible toilets on all floors



Fig 7: Team of urban planners and Samarthyam members who drafted Access Code of buildings

5. CONCLUSION

As a result of the workshops and advocacy campaign with key stakeholders, Auroville architects' have taken up the motto "we start today". Access regulations for public buildings and large blocks of apartments are being drawn up and put into practice. A monitoring mechanism and third party evaluation is planned for each new construction by a group of PwDs and architects. Few buildings including Matrimandir which were access audited are being retrofitted to be made them accessible, user-friendly and safe. This commendable movement towards universal accessibility is in keeping with Auroville's vision: *equality in the face of all circumstances is the chief aim to be attained in order to live in Auroville.*

6. REFERENCES

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