

– IN THE SHADOW OF 'THE CITY' YET TO COME: Auroville, Developmentalism and the Social Effects of Cityness

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Abstract

This article focuses on the planned community of Auroville in Tamil Nadu, India, founded in 1968. Building on critical readings of the settlement that have drawn attention to the power imbalance in its relationships with surrounding villages, the article delineates the ways that a geographical imagination of cityness has been a key component of the settlement's development and the forms of neo-coloniality in which it has been implicated. Drawing on archival and published sources as well as ethnographic research, the article discusses three ways in which the settlement performs a sense of its own 'cityness-to-come': first, the architectural discourse and planning rationality central to Auroville's identity; second, its agonistic public sphere vis-à-vis architecture and planning, and third, its ethos of learning and evolution, and the settlement's developmental teleology. In so doing, the article shows how 'the city' conceived as a textual and spatial promise, as well as a utopian aspiration, works ideologically to constitute the settlement itself, but also to precipitate social effects and uneven power relationships with village communities in this region. To sum up, this article develops an argument about the neo-colonial social work done by 'the city' conceived as text.

On 28 February 1968, close to 5,000 people gathered at an amphitheatre on an open plateau in Tamil Nadu, India. They were there to witness the inauguration of the alternative township, Auroville. The ceremony lasted around 75 minutes, during which time the settlement's charter was read in 16 languages, and representatives from 23 Indian States and Union Territories, as well as from 124 countries around the world, committed earth brought from their homelands to a ceremonial urn. After the urn was sealed, the ceremony was complete.¹ Over the next few years, a few hundred settlers came from international destinations as well as Indian cities to this predominantly agrarian area of Tamil Nadu, situated some 160 km south of Chennai and just 12 km north of the former French territory of Puducherry. These 'forecomers', as they were dubbed, arrived on land that their own accounts would variously describe as 'barren', 'wind-blown' and 'the worst farmland' (*The Auroville Experience*, 2006: 2–9). They were lured by the attempt to realize ambitions set out by the founders for a new, alternative form of organized society and communal existence; a 'city-to-come' whose social organization would be inspired by the late Sri Aurobindo Ghosh's principles of integral yoga, honed and made concrete here at Auroville by his spiritual partner, Mirra Alfassa,

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1 For a full description of the opening ceremony, see *The Auroville Experience* 2006: 2–3.

known to settlers simply as 'The Mother'. Auroville's chief architect and planner, Roger Anger, a French modernist, had set out an ambitious urban plan, not unlike 1960s French utopian city designs (see Busbea, 2007). The founders predicted that within 30 years the city would house up to 50,000 citizens. Over 50 years on Auroville has around 2,200 residents, and only some 5 to 10% of the original city plan has actually been built.

Even though it has clearly not realized its own ambitions, it would be rash to declare Auroville a failure. In fact, it could be said to be thriving insofar as the township's very establishment, its well-developed organizational and social infrastructure, the increase in the region's agrarian productivity that it precipitated, and not least its longevity, all testify to the veracity of this experiment in alternative social and spatial organization. Nonetheless, the historian Jessica Namakkal (2012; 2021) has argued that the early utopian and spiritual practices behind Auroville served to reinforce and reinsert colonial hierarchies. She emphasizes how the settlement has been characterized by a kind of 'anticolonial colonialism', in which 'although the discourse of anti-imperialism was present, the actions carried out by the Aurovillian pioneers exemplify the construction of a neocolonial space and culture' (Namakkal, 2012: 69). Namakkal's work has shown how this unfolded in the early ideologies and processes of land acquisition, and Auroville's relationships with extant and surrounding village communities since its foundation in 1968.

In this article I argue that the discourse of 'cityness' has been, and continues to be, centrally implicated in these processes. I show how a spatial imagination of cityness has been not just central to Auroville's inception and the community's continued perception of itself, but also how it has embedded a developmental imagination foundational to the settlement that has precipitated the kinds of neocolonial relations that Namakkal implies. In what follows I tease out Aurovillian planning rationality, architectural modernism, agonistic forms of social organization and agrarian developmentalism as key components of a putatively urban imagination that has, I argue, been key to the settlement's ongoing relationships with its neighbouring communities. In the context of the early and mid-twentieth century developmental nationalism that took the postcolonial Indian state-to-come as its primary utopian aspiration (see Zachariah, 2005), this article shows how Auroville's liberatory, ecotopian and spiritual intent has, from its outset, been driven by a future-oriented *urban* imagination. My argument is that, despite the community's intention to build a unique kind of settlement, 'the city' analytically conceived as a figure of thought and spatial promise yet-to-come, has been for Auroville a kind of experimental utopia, or 'illuminating virtuality' (Lefebvre, [1970] 2003: 13; Pinder 2013). It is, however, also a spatial promise and geographical imagination with troubling progressivist and developmental social effects that transcend its own boundaries. Insofar as it is my argument that cityness, in this context, is a spatial promise with social effects, one of the aims of this article is to demonstrate the ways that 'the city' works as text, as a spatial signifier, an ideology, or what Raymond Williams (1977: 128–35) might refer to as an *emergent* structure of feeling, beyond any of the material properties that urban form may be said to possess.

In the next section, I show why an engagement with this unusual case study matters for broader understandings of the social work that the city does when conceived as a category and textual signifier over and above an actually existing material reality. I then turn to Auroville itself in more detail, providing an outline of the settlement's history and operation, before discussing some of the ways in which an anticipatory cityness is performed, first, through architecture and planning rationality, and second, via an agonistic public sphere in relation to planning decisions. My discussion of the ways that the Aurovillian city-to-come is performed alights on the settlement's commitment to evolution and learning, which, as I shall show, has manifested historically in agrarian development schemes that bear striking similarities to eighteenth- and

nineteenth-century colonial teleologies of improvement and progress. I conclude by revisiting some of the broader implications of teasing out ‘the city’ conceived as text like this, not only for Auroville but also for geographers and urban scholars interested in the socio-spatial formations that the city precipitates.²

Of ‘the city’ yet to come: the social work of ‘the city’ conceived as text

Auroville is an unusual example to mobilize in the context of urban studies and human geography. Whatever Auroville might tell us would, on the face of it, seem exceptional rather than generalizable given that, from the project’s outset, Auroville was intended as something of a unique experiment, incomparable to the cities against which its plans might eventually be compared. Indeed, in a 1972 response to a UNDP assessment of the early settlement, Auroville’s own Planning Committee were explicit that: ‘Auroville has a special function that has never been tried in history. It’s a spiritual town—a cultural town. Based on the same logic as above this city will represent a different physical environment & its growth pattern will be based on primarily spiritual and cultural considerations ... That is why it has to be different in all the ways from any other city at any time. Hence it is useless to compare it with any of the existing cities’.³ What I want to suggest, however, is that it is precisely Auroville’s exceptional nature as a settlement that cannot easily be pinned down by any extant noun, which reveals something important about the social work ‘the city’ does as a textual referent and future-oriented imagination. Indeed, this short extract from a Planning Committee report reveals the ways that the semantic coordinates of Auroville both slip beyond the purview of what ‘the city’ can name (‘it has to be different in all the ways from any other city at any time’), yet at the same time mobilizes ‘the city’ as the spatial unit that the settlement desires to become (‘this city will represent ...’).

In his seminal work on the developmental temporalities of Winterveld, Pikine, Douala and Jidda, AbdouMaliq Simone (2004: 1) writes that ‘African cities are works in progress, at the same time exceedingly creative and extremely stalled’. Auroville is quite explicitly a ‘work in progress’. It is at once a putatively urban project that is both ‘creative’ and ‘stalled’, yet its perpetually stalled progress circulates around the very promise that ‘the city’ poses for this settlement. If Simone’s interest in *For the City Yet to Come* is in looking towards the changing life and creative potential in four extant African cities, my own interest here is in the promise that ‘the city’, conceived as a future-oriented geographical imagination, holds for Aurovillians, but also in the social effects of this spatial promise in this regional South Asian context.

At stake in this analysis of Auroville’s own rather unique history, then, is an understanding of the ways that ‘the city’ works as a spatial and ideological promise in this South Asian context. This is a promise not unconnected with the term’s implications in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century histories replete with the civilizational and teleological narratives that were the hallmark of colonial developmentalism. In the context of urban studies/geography and with respect to that classic urban question ‘what is a city?’, the implications of my argument here are that one answer is that ‘the city’ need not always be an actually existing material and morphological entity. It can also be an imaginative production, a textual object or, as Said (1978) would have it, an ‘imaginative geography’. This analytical orientation to the urban question brings an older tradition of new cultural geography to the heart of urban studies insofar as it is a way of

2 The article is based on ethnographic fieldwork including semi-structured interviews with architects and self-builders, as well as archival work at the Auroville archives, all of which was conducted through 2012 and 2013. It is supplemented by a substantive engagement with the published material on Auroville, available both in text and digitally.

3 ‘Extracts from a draft by the Auroville Planning Group, 1972’, in ‘Auroville: The Avatar’s Model Town, From Vision to Reality. A compilation of documents related to the construction of Auroville during Mother’s years’, 1988, p. 79, File 6, Box 3, Archive of Auroville.

conceiving 'the city as text' (see Duncan, 1990; Jazeel, 2021). Conceiving of 'the city' like this is to suggest that, ontologically, 'the city' is like a landscape inasmuch as it is 'a way of representing, structuring or symbolizing surroundings' (Daniels and Cosgrove, 1988: 1). As I stress below, it does not matter whether Auroville can legitimately justify its claim to be a city, and the intention of this article is categorically not to arbitrate on any such normative question. What I am more interested in is the performative work and perlocutionary effect of this urban declaration, this city-shaped spatial imagination. What does it mean and do for Aurovillians, and their neighbours, to endlessly repeat and perform the settlement's urban aspirations and identity? To this extent, the chains of signification at work in new cultural geographical analyses of landscapes conceived as 'ways of seeing' matter, for whatever else it is, 'the city' in this sense can also be considered a narrative production of spatial meaning, and one which has social effects.

As well as bringing the urban question into the weft and warp of foundational strands within the new cultural geography, my approach in this article also builds on more recent urban studies scholarship that, departing from Lefebvre's work on urban utopias, stresses how 'the city' can usefully be regarded as a concept. In David Wachsmuth's words (2014: 79), the city thus conceived is a 'thought object' rather than a 'real object'..., a 'category of practice' rather than a 'category of analysis'. What this precipitates, he argues, is a slight shift from analyses of the city as an objective urban form or moment towards attending to the experiences, interpretations and performances of what 'the city' promises as a horizon of possibility. To this I would add that this approach also facilitates a necessary engagement with the social effects of the bountiful promise of 'the city' as performed and inhabited in this South Asian context. Conceived like this—as textual refrain, promise, and performance with social effects that in the context of Auroville are regional in scope—'the city' must also be seen as intensely ideological (*ibid.*). This is a point to which I shall return in the conclusion of this article because, as I show in what follows, 'the city to come' is that which precipitates and stabilizes power relationships between the Aurovillian settlement and its neighbouring village communities.

Auroville

Auroville was founded by Blanche Rachel Mirra Alfassa (see Figure 1), a Frenchwoman who settled in Pondicherry in 1920 having met her spiritual partner, or Shakti, Sri Aurobindo Ghosh, there in 1914. Ghosh himself passed away fully 18 years prior to Auroville's founding ceremony, however, the settlement's historical roots are inseparable from his legacy. Sri Aurobindo Ghosh (Figure 1) was an Indian nationalist and freedom fighter who, along with Subramania Bharati and V.V.S. Aiyar, went into exile in the French colonial territory Puducherry (Pondicherry) after the British issued a warrant for his arrest in Calcutta in 1910 (see Heehs, 2008; Davies, 2017; 2020). Though Aurobindo's early years were characterized by his involvement in militant, anti-colonial national liberation, after his relocation to Puducherry in 1910 he seemed to withdraw from political work. His efforts in Puducherry focused instead on the cultivation of the spiritual life, key to which was the system of 'integral yoga' that he painstakingly developed, nurtured and taught. Integral yoga focused on the evolution of being that could be obtained via practice and dedication in one's lifetime. Sri Aurobindo founded an Ashram in Puducherry in 1914 which quickly developed an international following keen to practice and cultivate the spiritual life through its pursuit of integral yoga. Although Aurobindo Ghosh died in 1950, long before Auroville was inaugurated or even planned, the township was conceived as a manifestation of his spiritual work. Many regard the transition in Aurobindo's preoccupations between 1910 and 1914 as tantamount to his 'retirement' from political life. However, as Andrew Davies (2020: 116) has recently argued, Aurobindo's own evolution 'was in fact grounded in a universalism which, whilst spiritual, was inherently political too'. Davies's argument has important implications for

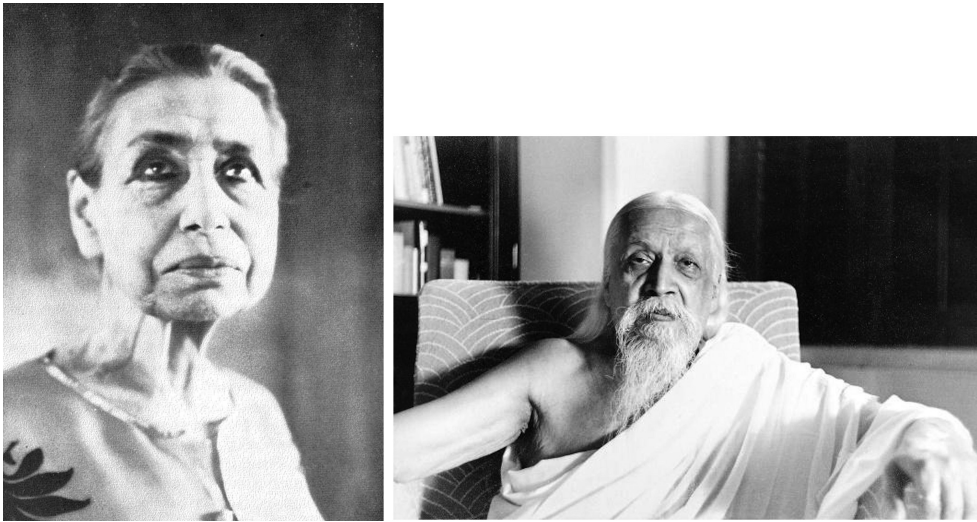


FIGURE 1 Mirra Alfassa/The Mother (left); Sri Aurobindo Ghosh (right) photographed by Henri Cartier Bresson, Pondicherry 1951 (sources: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Divine-mother_\(mirra_alfassa\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Divine-mother_(mirra_alfassa).jpg) creative commons/public domain; <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/86/Sri-Aurobindo-sit.jpg> creative commons/public domain).

my own interest in Auroville's transcendence of the postcolonial national via the register of the urban because, as he also stresses, Sri Aurobindo's post-1914 convictions were that integral yoga was of benefit to *all humanity*, not just Indians. Indeed, as his career progressed it became increasingly clear that he viewed the independence of India, when it came in 1947, as but one step towards 'a future of pan-Asian unity, to be followed by an eventual world union, and an evolutionary change in consciousness' (*ibid.*: 133). In other words, for Ghosh and his followers the development of the Supramental consciousness, to which the practice of integral yoga aimed, was not realizable through national liberation, feeling, or yearning, but instead through the gestation of a deeper power in the world at large; one that could transcend the geopolitical boundaries of post-colonial nation-statism. India would play a part in this universal spiritual development only insofar as it could facilitate the cultivation of spiritual practice aimed at something larger (Ghosh in *ibid.*). Auroville was to be the concretization of that larger something that aimed at transcending national preoccupations (see Figure 2).

Auroville's founder, Aurobindo's spiritual partner or Shakti, Mirra Alfassa, came to be known simply as 'The Mother' from the late 1920s; a title that Sri Aurobindo gave her and one that she would be known by for the rest of her life. She began actively planning Auroville in the early 1960s, but in 1954, four years after Aurobindo's death, she wrote these words about the necessity for a place like Auroville in terms that echoed and amplified his transcendent spiritual ambitions:

There should be somewhere upon earth that no nation could claim as its sole property, a place where all human beings of good will, sincere in their aspirations, could live freely as citizens of the world, obeying one single authority, that of the supreme truth (The Mother, in *Auroville: a dream takes shape*, 2010: 2).

This was, in effect, a clarion call to make public, to concretize and to literally build, Aurobindo's philosophy. Auroville launched as a project in 1965 when the French



FIGURE 2 Model of the Galaxy Plan, Auroville Visitor Centre (photo by the author, 2012)

architect Roger Anger submitted his plan for the township; a plan that became known as ‘The Galaxy Plan’ (Figure 2) because of its visual resemblance to a galactic constellation. It was an abstract design for a model community, which in its formative years and at this very early stage aimed at being what its prospective founders variously referred to as a ‘city of human unity’, a ‘spiritual city’, ‘universal township’, and ‘city of the future’. This galaxy-shaped design would have four zones, each spiralling out from the geographic centre: a cultural zone, an industrial zone, an international zone, and a residential zone, the whole area of Auroville being some twenty kilometres squared, with an urban centre occupying two square kilometres. The Galaxy Plan was accepted by The Mother and the ceremony described at the beginning of this article marked the city’s formal opening. Central to the township is its charter, which from its inception has provided the settlement’s guiding constitutional principles. It states that:

- 1 Auroville belongs to nobody in particular. Auroville belongs to humanity as a whole. But to live in Auroville one must be a willing servitor of the Divine Consciousness.
- 2 Auroville will be the place of an unending education, of constant progress and a youth that never ages.
- 3 Auroville wants to be a bridge between the past and the future. Taking advantage of all discoveries from without and from within. Auroville will boldly spring towards future realizations.
- 4 Auroville will be a site of material and spiritual researches for a living embodiment of an actual Human Unity.

The Auroville Charter (1968)

The project's promise to be an experimental city for human unity, one founded upon a complex mix of spiritual and secular principles, attracted both Indian state and UNESCO backing. From the outset then, as much as a project that aimed to experiment with forms of communalist socio-spatial organization, Auroville was also conceived as a cosmopolitan project with spiritually inflected internationalist ambitions that would transcend national self-interest (Namakkal, 2012: 61; see also Minor, 1999).⁴ Both despite and because of its cosmopolitan promise, Auroville was also born from the privilege that went hand in hand with upper-caste spirituality. A high-caste Hindu himself, Sri Aurobindo held a fluid rather than rigid conception of caste, believing that it was a Brahmanical duty to preserve 'the spiritual and intellectual elevation of the race' (Ghosh, [1907] 2002: 684). As Ajanta Subramaniam (2019: 19) has written, these kind of upper-caste commitments to universalistic ideals of equality and rationality were often enabled by the kinds of accumulated privileges associated with Brahmanical entitlement. Furthermore, as Subramaniam's work reveals, there are clear associations between the kinds of late-twentieth-century technical education and knowledge (which would include architectural modernity) and upper caste privilege (*ibid.*). Though the subject is beyond the scope of this article, these foundational caste privileges continue to be woven into Auroville.

Anger's 1965 Galaxy Plan was an abstraction insofar as it was designed around no site in particular. The location of Auroville was only decided in the years 1965–7, after the plan had been formally accepted. In other words, the site itself had little to do with the sheer imaginative ambition of this 'city-to-come'. Anger, The Mother and other founders evaluated a handful of sites in Tamil Nadu before settling upon the township's current location, which at the time was an arid plot of notionally 'waste' land, with a number of villages in close proximity. As I argue below, the perception that this region was underdeveloped, that the potential of land here was being 'wasted', was an enabling discourse for the imaginative and material workings of a developmental imagination and praxis in which cityness plays an important role. Indeed, the early stage of this twentieth-century project bears similarities to the modernity that Chatterjee *et al.*, (2017: 547) suggest was inextricable from European expansion into the New World some 500 years earlier. If not replete with the 'Edenic emptiness' that Chatterjee *et al.* point to as an imaginative trope that enabled colonization through the Age of Discovery,⁵ for the founders of Auroville this region *did* appear to be the perfect ground for a 'stage-based account of human history, and increasing encounters with other societies deemed to be technologically inferior' (*ibid.*). Practically, what this meant through Auroville's first few years was that one of the initial challenges was simply how to impose this 'city of human unity' onto already inhabited space. Land grants from the state helped, but the community's relationship with the local villages was always, and continues to be, contentious.

In the late 1960s and 1970s there were around 300 or so settlers, many of whom came from abroad, from Western Europe and North America in particular, considering themselves to be spiritualists or environmentalists in pursuit of alternative lifestyles and the promise of communalist living. In 2012, Auroville had a population of 2,269 (*The Auroville Handbook*, 2013: 11–12), around 40% of whom were metropolitan, middle-class and mostly upper-caste Indians who chose Auroville in preference to

4 Though unique in its emergent form, Auroville's intended internationalist solidarities and reach, its experimental mandate and practical intentions held much in common with other twentieth-century intentional and ecotopian communities internationally (for examples, see Neima, 2019 on Dartington Hall in East Devon; and Srinivas, 2015: 50–86 on The Madras Theosophical Society).

5 Although in her account of settling in Auroville and her own and her partner Bob Lawlor's experiences in 1968, Deborah Lawlor draws remarkably close parallels to precisely that kind of colonially inflected Edenic discourse: 'The palmyra trees, the vast plains, the deep canyons, there were so many aspects of nature to be worshipped and honoured. So "Adam and Eve" went around admiring the landscape ...' (*The Auroville Experience*, 2006: 8).

cities like Delhi, Mumbai and Chennai. The majority of the rest of the population were from Europe; approximately 15% French, 13% German, 7% Italian, 4% Dutch, and 3–4% American and Russian (*ibid.*). From its outset, Auroville has worked (unsuccessfully so far) towards developing an economy without monetary exchange. Aurovillians work for the community in commercial or service units, but they do not receive wages *per se*. Instead, they receive a monthly allowance (in 2009, it was Rs 6,000), which is credited to an account managed by the settlement's Financial Service. The account is debited for purchases made in Auroville's handful of stores and cafeterias, although cash still circulates too. Lunches are provided for Aurovillians in the communal 'Solar Kitchen', which can feed around 900 people daily. Using their own financial resources, Aurovillians are free to build their own properties within the settlement's communities once they are granted planning permission by L'Avenir d'Auroville, the township's planning authority. However, people have no formal ownership rights. The properties they build become part of the collective assets of Auroville.

Given the current population is less than one twentieth of the anticipated maximum of 50,000 residents, urban development has been scattered and fragmented. As a consequence, Auroville looks like a fairly barren settlement, and it can feel like the sparsely populated place it is. Much of its connecting road network is incomplete and in fact consists of dirt tracks. Cars are not allowed in the township. Motorbikes, mopeds and bicycles are the preferred modes of transport, and a few hardy souls walk the sometimes considerable distances between complexes and buildings in the hot dry climate. In the light of this, if, as urbanists suggest, cities are characterized by densities and concentrations of people and things, the heterogeneity of lifestyles they juxtapose in close proximity, and the siting of networks of communication, flow and interconnection across and beyond the locality in question (Amin and Thrift, 2002: 2; see also Pile, 1999; McFarlane, 2020), then Auroville falls short of these criteria in many key aspects. It lacks social and material density, sociologically it lacks diversity of lifestyles, and it actively works to instantiate forms of enclosure as a community, drawing only the connections it desires and wants to cultivate beyond its territorial presence.

On the other hand, this is a place whose organizational patterns are reminiscent of a city. It has a host of municipal buildings, including concert halls, a public library, international pavilions, and a town hall that houses municipal organizations such as the settlement's council, its housing service, planning group, board of commerce, and land service. It also has guesthouses, a visitor centre, offices and factories for its textile industry. Even the very existence of the archive in which I worked indicates an attempt to curate a sanctioned institutional presence and memory, producing what Amin and Thrift (2002: 23) refer to as a kind of scripting of the place's urban bricolage; a gathering together of 'truth claims' about the place. Perhaps Auroville's most significant as well as unique municipal institution, however, is its ostentatious centrepiece, the Matrimandir (Figure 3), which sits at the geographic centre of the settlement. The Matrimandir is a gold-clad geodesic structure, both temple and meditation chamber for the community. It rises out of the earth in order to symbolize the birth of a new consciousness, and it provides a place where the community meets to celebrate Founder's Day and New Year's Day. It is also a tourist attraction in its own right—although its lustrous magnificence masks a history of labour relations involving on-site disputes (Guigan, 2018: 297), as well as the objectification by settlers of local Tamil labour employed in the construction process (Namakkal, 2021: 194). In all these ways and more that I shall expand on below, Auroville is characterized by a kind of performative cityness that anticipates urban futures in the arguably absent urbanity of its present. Indeed, as I have stressed, from its very outset Auroville has been framed as a 'city in the making', not a 'rural' or 'agrarian' community, or simply a collection of farms and forests, though those labels may better describe its spatial present.



FIGURE 3 The Matrimandir, Auroville (photo by the author, 2014)

As well as these municipal institutions, Auroville contains just over 100 settlement buildings, including houses and apartment blocks. These are built in a wide variety of mostly modernist architectural styles (see Figure 4). There is no characteristically ‘Aurovillian’ style of architectural modernism. Rather, in keeping with the idea of an avowedly experimental city, the township contains a variety of architecture and forms of regional architectural innovation, including earth architecture and other sustainable forms of building, brutalist inspired concrete architecture, minimalism and rendered ‘California-style’ houses, French-inspired international modernism, inside-out critical regional styles more reminiscent of Sri Lankan or Balinese tropical modernism, and abstract and spiritual modernism. Indeed, Auroville is known throughout India for its richness of architectural diversity and experimentation. It is home to some world leaders in certain aspects of sustainable architecture, for example, the architect known as Satprem is considered one of the world’s leading earth architects. The township also has a very dense concentration of architects amongst its population: around 1 in every 80–90 people is a professional architect, and many more are self-builders. This is the kind of place to which Indian architecture schools regularly make field trips.

Despite this rich architectural diversity and concentration, despite these civic institutions that perform and enunciate a certain kind of cityness, it is worth re-emphasizing the lack of social and spatial density that characterizes Auroville’s very unurban structure of feeling. I stress again that my aim here is not to categorically adjudicate whether or not Auroville is, or can legitimately be called, either ‘a city’, or ‘authentically urban’. Rather, my interest in this article is in the textual and performative enactment of cityness that, in the context of Auroville’s relationship with its surrounding villages, instantiates the kind of anticolonial colonialism that Jessica Namakkal (2012) has associated with the settlement. It is to the relationship between a performative



FIGURE 4 Some of the diverse architectural styles in Auroville (photos by the author, 2014)

geographical imagination of cityness and Auroville's neo-colonialism that I turn in the following sections of this article.

'The city' performed 1: architecture and planning rationality

Given that Auroville is renowned in India and beyond for its architectural vanguardism, it is unsurprising that much has been written about Aurovillian architecture and its urban planning. There are in circulation a number of glossy coffee table books that variously celebrate Auroville's architecture, style and design, and landscapes and gardens,⁶ and a large section of Auroville's own website is dedicated to providing the public with information about its architecture and planning.⁷ This includes the bios of a number of architects and architectural practices, and detailed descriptions of the evolution of the settlement's urban conceptualization and design.⁸ In addition, blown-up architectural drawings and Computer Generated Images (CGIs) of the city-to-come are liberally displayed in many of Auroville's public buildings and spaces (see Figure 5).

These kinds of non-material instantiations of architecture and planning are not incidental to the signifying practices and politics in which architecture and planning are implicated (Jazeel, 2013: 145–65). That is to say, despite its materiality, architecture's aesthetic terrain is inseparable from its textual field. Indeed, as Edward Said (1983: 39) has argued, texts are always in and of the world; they are *worldly*, and it is precisely this proximity of text to world that warrants taking the considerable discursive terrain of Aurovillian architecture and planning rationality seriously. For the architectural theorist Jeremy Till (2009), built space's meaning is always contingent upon myriad non-material events, actants, and their circulatory networks. Paraphrasing Till, to do the social work it does, *architecture depends* on far more than just its material presence and realization. All those textual referents to Auroville's own built space and to future materializations of its intended form—coffee table books, web materials, CGIs and plans—play a constitutive role in the production of a kind of cultural logic regarding the settlement itself.

My point here is that the textual field surrounding Aurovillian architecture and planning is not just an epiphenomenon of its concentrated spatial expertise. It is also central to the kinds of aesthetic literacy and modernity that characterize the settlement, and, as such, this is a textual field that has become central to the utopian workings of a geographical imagination of cityness at Auroville. That is to say that, despite the absence of the actually existing social thickness characteristic of the urban, Auroville is replete with plans and CGIs of the future concretization of buildings; these visual and textual materializations of an as-yet-unrealized city adorn the walls of the town hall, they are posted on display boards at the Visitor Centre, they make up interpretation boards at the entrance to complexes, and they generally form a conspicuous presence in the Aurovillian landscape (Figure 5). Their very conspicuousness acts as a kind of scripting and aestheticization of the imagined city-to-come (Amin and Thrift, 2002: 24); a pervasive visualization of a distinctly urban *future*. This is a textual field that helps to cement the idea, and indeed experience, that Auroville is a 'city of the future'.

The utopian symbolism of urban planning has a long history in South Asia that is tightly enmeshed with European visions of colonial and post-colonial space. For example, with respect to the history of European urban designs in India, Smriti

6 Examples include a series of books collectively produced by the settlement: *Auroville Architecture: towards a new form of consciousness* (2011), *Auroville Form, Style and Design: towards new forms for a new consciousness* (2011) and *Landscapes and Gardens of Auroville: the transformation of the land* (2013).

7 See Auroville, <https://www.auroville.org/categories/22> (last accessed 6 April 2021).

8 See Auroville, <https://www.auroville.org/contents/4153> (accessed 6 April 2021).



FIGURE 5 Architectural drawings, plans and models on display across Auroville (photos by the author, 2014)

Srinivas (2015: 5) notes how Patrick Geddes referred to his own town plans as symbols and notations of thought. In this respect, the pervasive circulation of Auroville's Galaxy Plan is very relevant (see Figure 2), for it is a design that embodies Roger Anger's conceptualization of The Mother's idea of Auroville. It is a concept as much as an urban plan and, as the Aurovillian architect Anupama Kundoo (2009: 120) has written, the Galaxy concept is a 'city plan of iconic quality'. It is one that has been widely circulated and published and, in fact precisely because of its wide circulation, not least in and across Auroville itself, it has come to 'symbolically represent the idea of Auroville itself' (*ibid.*). For Henri Lefebvre ([1970] 2003: 12), this kind of 'science of *planimetry*' is a form of writing that historically has helped distinguish between the 'culture of urbanity and the naïve brutality of rusticity'. The Galaxy Plan works like this, not just as an icon of Auroville in the making, but also an icon of the settlement's own exceptional modernity in this region.

My argument here is that these images and other textualizations of Aurovillian architecture and planning act as effective 'interfaces' (Rose *et al.*, 2014) between social and urban imaginaries. These images and textualizations are key sites through which 'the city' can be actualized, visualized and anticipated in its material and affective absence. As Magrit Pernau (2014: 546) has argued in relation to the built environment of nineteenth-century Delhi, 'city planning aims at the creation of emotions, at least for those inhabitants of the city deemed important'. For Aurovillians then, architectural discourse and planning rationality are the performative enactment of Auroville's promise, its futurity. The interfacial work of these images and textualizations is to bring Aurovillians, and visitors, into an anticipatory and experiential domain of (urban) modernity. In Blochian terms (Bloch, 1995: 12), they constitute a textual terrain that reflects the hope-able for many Aurovillians, the illuminated display of an outlined utopia. And in its mechanics, in its very 'interfaciality' (Rose *et al.*, 2014: 392), this terrain does far more than just reflect. It also gestates an anticipatory utopian consciousness (Bloch, 1995: 12.); a mind's eye view of the possible. It is in this sense that Auroville's cityness can be considered intensely ideological because it is a discourse that is not only enabled and (re)produced by this very same performative textual field, but as I suggest below, Aurovillian cityness is a discourse that stabilizes particular power relationships between the community and its surrounding villages.

'The city' performed II: agonism, experimentalism, aesthetic literacy

The Mother's presence and influence as sovereign and then spectre in Auroville is both obvious from written accounts (see Kapur, 2021; and *The Auroville Experience*, 2006, for example), and palpable in Auroville to this day. However, it would be wrong to assume this is a settlement with a singular consciousness. Citizens debate, deliberate and disagree with one another, sometimes passionately and agonistically so. Indeed, it is precisely this deliberative, agonistic and lively public sphere that many Aurovillians see as a distinguishing feature of the settlement's modernity in relation to its neighbouring villages. It is in this context that Auroville's claim to be an 'experimental city' must be taken seriously, especially in architectural and planning terms. As I have stressed above, this is a settlement characterized by its profusion of architectural styles (see Figure 4), indeed, as Kundoo (2009: 117) puts it, 'Within India the architecture of Auroville, produced over the last 40 years, is unanimously associated with innovation, experimentation and the search for perfection'. Its experiments in social organization and communal living as well bear testimony to the creative and innovative elan at the heart of the project, such that, again as Kundoo puts it, 'Auroville offers itself as a "laboratory"' (*ibid.*). In this context, architectural aesthetics provides an important deliberative and at times agonistic register through which experimentation takes place. And, despite the inevitable influence of Anger's urban master-planning, his singular vision as it were, Auroville has evolved as a social ecology characterized by innovation

and free thought amongst a group of people who bring with them a wealth of diverse architectural training, approaches to design and experience. In this sense, debates about appropriate architecture are far more apparent than any easily identifiable 'Aurovillian style'.

For example, one architect I spoke with, Dharin, referred to a fundamental disagreement over architectural philosophy that he had with Roger Anger. Dharin has built his practice around an architectural vernacularism that makes connections to local and historical building traditions. For Anger, however, this sympathy with context had no place in a self-proclaimed city-of-the-future. Indeed, Anger's own style tended toward abstraction as an expression of Auroville's spatial futurity; an active architectural disembedding from context that can be seen in the Galaxy Plan and a number of his public buildings. Dharin relayed an encounter with Anger in a public planning meeting in the early 2000s where their disagreements came to a head. Anger, according to Dharin, lost his temper in an exchange that culminated in the Chief Planner making a derisory off-the-cuff comment about Indian senses of aesthetics (Dharin is Indian born).⁹ While this encounter clearly hints at broader issues regarding 'race' and the fractured politics of Aurovillian cosmopolitanism, it interests me in this context for a more mundane reason: that Dharin was happy to talk about this encounter suggested a certain normalization of agonistic debate in the Aurovillian public sphere in relation to design issues. In other words, strong differences of opinion in terms of architectural aesthetics are entirely normal.

Public debate surrounding the Matrimandir (Figure 3) offers another snapshot of this kind of dissent. The structure itself divides opinion. Many Aurovillians I spoke with expressed a deep fondness for the abstract building and its symbolic and practical importance to the community. It is also perhaps the single most popular tourist attraction in Auroville. Indeed, for many tourists it symbolizes Auroville as much as, if not more than, Anger's Galaxy Plan. At the same time there are many Aurovillians, particularly among the architecture and design community, who passionately dislike the Matrimandir and its symbolism. For example, Arnaud—a gardener of French origin, born and raised in Auroville—was vehement in his disapproval, stressing 'I think it's a disgrace to India, and it's a lack of respect to Tamil Nadu ... I don't like it aesthetically. I think the gold is just not appropriate in a country where 600 million people don't have basic needs and food, and the gardens, that's just absolutely criminal'.¹⁰ Arnaud's reference to the gardens was a comment on the sheer amount of resources required (including water) to keep land around the Matrimandir clear and pristine (see Figure 3). His remarks also locate Auroville both in its regional and national context in ways that are relatively unusual given the settlement's universal and transcendent aspirations. Indeed, Arnaud's arguments make much sense, and he was not alone in his dislike of the Matrimandir. Of interest to me here, however, is simply his willingness to openly debate the political economy and symbolism of the township's aesthetics.

This not uncommon public dissent is symptomatic of an aesthetic literacy that characterizes the production of the Aurovillian public sphere. As I have stressed, there is little by way of common aesthetic terrain amongst the community. Instead, the social is constituted through these fractious, agonistic debates, which is to say that aesthetic literacy, that very ability to argue and debate aesthetically, is key to the emergence of Aurovillian modernity. As the architect Sudarshanie put it, 'Auroville allows for that [extreme difference]. That's the best part. I mean sometimes to disastrous ends, but every laboratory has a meltdown now and then, I think we go through our period of meltdown again, but something always comes out of the meltdown'.¹¹ Paraphrasing the

9 Interview with Dharin, architect, 10 August 2012 (note, all names are pseudonyms).

10 Arnaud, in interview with Arnaud and Sudarshanie, 3 August 2012.

11 Sudarshenie, in interview with Arnaud and Sudarshenie, 3 August 2012.

architectural theorist Rahul Mehrotra (2011: 31), this pluralistic approach to developing appropriately modern visual idioms has been key to an ongoing struggle in South Asia to make architectural modernism work. As a result, for some Aurovillians at least these agonistic, plural and tense negotiations of the modern constitute one way of socially disambiguating Auroville from the 'non-modern', rural forms of social organization surrounding it. One architect, Sheena, was explicit about this:

The difference between the village and Auroville is that you wouldn't dare to go against the flow in the village, whereas in Auroville each of us is individuals and if need be ... we go against the flow, we say 'no, we don't want this thing'. And, you know, we fight each other, [sometimes] at the cost of not being able to get things done. But there's not this herd mentality, and thank God for that.¹²

What I stress in the penultimate section of this article is that Sheena articulates a logic that is deeply embedded in the Aurovillian sense of itself as a social force of modernization in this region. The aesthetic modernism of experimental architecture and agonistic planning rationalities are key to this ethic of modernization, which, as I have been arguing, is also fundamentally spatial insofar as it hinges on and around a geographical imagination of cityness. Yet, as I explore in more depth now, this is a spatial imagination replete with the kinds of liberal and colonial developmentalist implications that Namakkal (2012; 2021) names as Auroville's anticolonial colonialism.

'The city' performed III: evolution, learning and the developmental imagination

'Auroville will be the place of an unending education, of constant progress for a youth that never ages.'
Clause 2, Auroville Charter

That an ethic of evolution and learning pervades Auroville is unsurprising, given that 'progress' is written into its Charter, and that a particular understanding of human evolution is key to Sri Aurobindo's integral yoga. Derived from a series of Sanskrit formulas, integral yoga aims at 'perfection and transformation of the world and life' (Heehs, 2008: 239). It is a system that positions within the grasp of each person who chooses to follow it the attainment of what Aurobindo referred to as the 'Supermind', or a form of 'Supramental' being (ibid.: 240). It is important then that The Mother envisaged Auroville as a place not only where this kind of human evolution and learning would be facilitated, but also one whose development would be informed by similar principles. Human and spatial evolution were inseparable from one another; as one planning document put it, Auroville was to be a place where 'man [sic.] might be lifted out of the painful chaos of where he is now'.¹³

One way this has manifested itself in Auroville is through an imperative for education in the light of a belief that learning was key to this kind of human evolution. However, in the early 1970s the founders decided that an education in human unity would not be achieved in schools but, as a passage in a planning report from 1972–3 put it, learning would be acquired by living by, and working with, the concepts of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother in the pursuit of a growth of consciousness. To this extent, the settlement's anticipated spatial form as a city was envisioned to have pedagogical value for Aurovillians. In a list of objectives for Auroville, the typed report went on to the state that:

12 Interview with Sheena, architect, 17 August 2012.

13 Box 1, File 10, 'Planning Early Years', Archive of Auroville, 1988.

It is obvious that there will be no schools in Auroville as the whole city with its factories and workshops, its open houses and poetry salons will be one huge school where learning is a continuous process not only for adults, but also for all Aurovillians alike.¹⁴

This note on education is point (d) in a longer list of seven planning objectives regarding the realization of Auroville. Tellingly, however, the report has been annotated by hand, and an eighth objective, point (h), added, which reads:

The residents of the villages in the area of A.V. [Auroville] must be provided with all facilities and opportunities to integrate themselves in A.V. if they so desire.¹⁵

This additional point implicates the developmental teleology underpinning this Aurovillian model of learning. In particular, it underscores the way the settlement's evolutionary elan works in relation to the surrounding villages: learning flows unidirectionally, from Auroville, the enlightened city-to-come, out and to its neighbouring villages. That this point is made as an annotation, an afterthought, also implies a self-confident belief in Aurovillian modernity in this regional context. This is a community that believes confidently in the veracity of, and its right to, its own developmental mandate; a mandate endorsed by UNESCO. One of the assumptions here, at least on paper in the mid-1970s, was that Auroville need not attempt to learn from the well-established village communities surrounding it. In this context, Auroville's notional cityness matters insofar as it is this element of its own future-oriented imaginative geography that distinguishes it from the surrounding rural context. Auroville is conceived as a harbinger of modernity in this bioregion. Its proponents envisage and imagine it to embody a particular way of life, one that resonates with some of the most classic characteristics of the new urbanism: an evolutionary linearity tethered to what is essentially a liberal ideal of progress and civilization (Amin and Thrift, 2002: 8). This kind of evolutionary linearity posits a particular relationship to the outside world, particularly the countryside (*ibid.*). The city here is premised upon an ideological separation from the non-city (Wachsmuth, 2014: 83), but in the case of Auroville, in the absence of an actual city this is a representational performance where cityness operates as an *emergent* structure of feeling (Williams, 1977: 128–35).

At various points in Auroville's history, this performative disambiguation of the settlement's imagined cityness from its surroundings has taken the form of an ostensibly didactic relationship to its constitutive outside in this agrarian region. For example, in 1968, the year of the settlement's founding, a sociologist referred to in the archives simply as Dr Vishwa, was commissioned to conduct an ethnographic survey of the local population in the region marked out for the Aurovillian experiment. He/she (the archives are unclear) produced a report based on a mere 3½ weeks of daily visits to local villages, elements of which were incorporated in a more expansive progress report on the international township plans. The report is revealing with regard to the neo-colonial patinas of the Auroville project. For example, Dr Vishwa makes reference to places earmarked for purchase and development by the Auroville foundation, however (s)he does so using their future Aurovillian names, only in brackets referring to them by the names of actually existing villages: 'We visited three groups of villagers which surrounded the following areas: Promesse—(Tiruchittambalam; Mortandi), Auro-Centre—(Irumbai), Auro-Plaz ...—(Bommayabalayam)'.¹⁶ The civilizing and modern

14 Anon, 'Conseil d'Administration d'Auroville', Document 2, File 4, Box 2 'Planning Early Years', c. 1975, Archive of Auroville.

15 *Ibid.*

16 Anon, 'Auroville—International Township, Progress Report—1 November 1968', p. 10, File 4, Box 1, Archive of Auroville, 1968.

intent of Aurovillian ambition is signalled here by renaming strategies that effectively erase prior spatial histories (see Jazeel, 2019: 76–7), and these erasures in the name of progress are only enhanced in descriptions of Dr Vishwa's encounters with villagers:

We have tried to explain to the villagers the aim of Auroville and the idea of brotherhood which represents this new adventure ... We have found on the whole they are most open to us. Of course, it was impossible to wean them away from the bad influence of their political leaders by just talking to them ... we shall have to consider carefully, but in a positive way, how best we can integrate them in building *the city of tomorrow*.

These people by no means represent an insurmountable problem if they are approached in a spirit of humility (*ibid.*, emphasis added).

The problem that Dr Vishwa grapples with is the potential impediment to progress that villages and villagers pose to Auroville, and implied within this notion of progress is the wholly different form of spatial organization that Auroville brings with it in this 'underdeveloped' regional context: its cityness, or more specifically the imaginative promise of what Vishwa refers to as 'the city of tomorrow' (*ibid.*).

Auroville subsequently pursued myriad village development programmes, many of which it continues with to this day. The moral imperatives behind such programmes have historically comprised thinly veiled articulations of a liberal developmental philosophy that effectively underpin, but importantly also performatively reiterate, a certain confidence in the tacit understanding that if Auroville is the 'city of tomorrow', then the villages by default comprise yesterday's forms of spatial (and social) organization. My point here is neither to argue against local development, nor to malign the relationalities with Tamil Nadu village communities that many Aurovillians have inevitably sought and worked hard to create over the decades. It is also important to stress that many of the agrarian techniques and transformations precipitated by Aurovillian settlement *have* done much to revitalize a regional landscape that in the 1960s was barren and unproductive. Nonetheless, as Vinay Gidwani (2008: 12) stresses, development is a modern iteration of 'progress', liberalism's watchword, and the concern for liberalism was always one of 'how to transform *wasteful* forms of moral conduct' (*ibid.*: 14). Historically, imperialism's spatial logic meant that the implementation of progress necessitated permanent colonial presence; settlement in other words (*ibid.*: 19). Colonialism's ideological afterlives are thus striking not just in the establishment of Auroville as a permanent settlement, but also in the apparent narrative inflections of its developmental work. For example, in a 1972 report on Auroville's programme for village development, a sketch of the village closest to Auroville, Kuyliapalayam, reveals a level of moral panic around the condition of the village and its unproductivity:

Kuyliapalayam is an insanitary, unhealthy, under-privileged and neglected village—one among hundred [sic.] of such other villages, with a population of about 1,500 emaciated, illiterate, uncared for people. The environmental conditions are primitive to the point of making life there as dirty as can be imagined

Most of the people are employed in agriculture and do nothing for half the year. Thus productivity per head is low with the result that income is extremely inadequate resulting in most families living close to scarcity conditions ... From the preceding report it is obvious that the economy of the village is antique, unstable and unproductive.¹⁷

17 Anon, 'Programme for Village Development', in 'File brought with Norman Dowsett's paper by Jyoti Sobel in Feb 98, American Fund for Auroville', p. 1, Doc 1, File 5, Box 2, 1972, Archive of Auroville.

These anxieties, expressed only 50 or so years ago, bear a striking resemblance to late-eighteenth- and nineteenth-century colonial discourses of Indian indolence and idleness. For example, Gidwani (2008: 27) writes how 'Alexander Dow, who wrote the three-volume *The History of Hindostan* in 1770, was able to sum up the nature of India's inhabitants in one word: "indolent"'. Over 200 years later in 1972, the report quoted above on Auroville's *Program for Village Development* echoes these colonial refrains, expressing a self-certain civilizational claim, which, as I have stressed, is buttressed by Auroville's imagined cityness. In other words, if there is a distinct trace of colonial developmentalism in the 1972 report, the geographical imagination of cityness plays a key role in that neo-coloniality. For these are claims about rural spaces that place those villages on the physical and ideological borders of Auroville, and in so doing performatively consolidate Auroville's own claims to be a city in the making; one that will have a civilizing effect on these 'insanitary' villages characterized by 'primitive' conditions. The report makes this ambition explicit in its very first sentence: 'It has been categorically stated that it remains one of the fundamental aspects of "AUROVILLE" that the present inhabitants of the villages in Auroville, as it will be, are the first citizens of the town'.¹⁸ If the naked intention here is to 'civilize', these are claims whose very function and effect is social and spatial hierarchization; they are claims made from a position of urbanity, and they are teleological, arrowing toward an inevitable urban futurity that Auroville represents if not yet materially embodies. These progressivist idioms provide what Chatterjee *et al.* (2017: 546) refer to as 'a sense of past, present, and future laden with normative dichotomies—between the modern and its opposite, the premodern, backward, or primitive'. As Chatterjee *et al.* go on to stress in the context of South Asia, through these kinds of refrains the temporal and spatial are fused producing what they refer to as 'timescapes', or 'narrative geographies', in which a teleological chronology meets the physical world. Two such narrative geographies, they stress, are especially relevant here: 'the global imaginary of colonialism, and *the city* as the iconic location of modernity' (*ibid.*: 547, emphasis added). As I have been suggesting, Auroville's narrative and performative cityness is precisely that which enables it to enlist villages and villagers in its universalizing project of modernization, just as it is able to bypass any kind of negotiation of, and with, the developmental nation-state.

Most fundamentally these anxieties and narrative geographies perform a classic Chicago school city/country opposition, which, as David Wachsmuth (2014: 82) has written, spatially demarcates the city not just from the countryside, but from history as well. In other words, these representational practices help produce Auroville as a historically intransitive space (Amin and Thrift, 2002: 10); one whose regional memory begins at 1968, the year of its founding, and from there shoots aggressively forward, reconstituting its city-ness-to-come and the historical erasures that trail in its wake through every iteration it makes about itself.

Conclusion

This article has shown how the imaginative geography of cityness continues to act as the principle ideological and spatial promise through which we may grasp the contours and precipitation of what Jessica Namakkal (2012: 69) refers to as Aurovillian 'anticolonial colonialism'. As the article has shown, focusing on the performative and narrative 'cityness-to-come' that has been so central to Auroville from its inception not only helps to make visible the mechanisms and manifestations of its ongoing power relations in the region, it also helps to disentangle its developmental and progressivist refrains from post- and anti-colonial Indian developmental nationalism.

As I have stressed, for Auroville cityness is the Lefebvrian ‘illuminating virtuality’ (Lefebvre, 2003: 17), or what David Wachsmuth (2014: 79) refers to as a ‘thought object’ rather than a ‘real object’; a ‘category of practice’ rather than a ‘category of analysis’. Among residents internal polarities still exist precisely around the question of whether to develop Auroville as a city according to the original vision or whether to allow the past organic pattern of slow growth to continue (Kundoo, 2009: 117). Indeed, at the time of writing this is a live issue given that the Auroville Foundation’s new governing board, which took over in October 2021 with senior BJP bureaucrat Jayanti Ravi appointed secretary, has signalled its clear intent to expedite Roger Anger’s Master Plan (Varma, 2022).¹⁹

Regardless of what happens with the settlement’s material and spatial form in the future, my argument here is that the imaginative geography of the settlement’s ‘cityness-to-come’ has been integral to its own sense of itself as a community and, further, that it is precisely this imagination that has precipitated its developmental relationship with neighbouring villages. One of the broader arguments of this article then is that ‘cityness’, conceived like this as a spatial and developmental promise, works *ideologically*. In the specific context of Auroville, I have shown how the ideological function of this geographical imagination of cityness cannot easily be disentangled from the colonial teleology that, as Chatterjee *et al.* (2017: 547) write, poses ‘the city as the iconic location of modernity’. What I have in mind here are the ways that ‘the city’ and ‘cityness-to-come’ work as mental frameworks, languages, concepts, imageries of thought and systems of representation deployed to stabilize and produce Auroville’s developmental social formation (on ideology, see Hall, 1996: 27; and Althusser, [1978] 2008: 1–60). In other words, my concern in this article has been to show the social effects of ‘the city’ conceived like this as textual refrain, spatial promise and developmental teleology. For geographical engagements with the city, this is an approach that has attempted to mobilize cultural approaches to considering the narrative production of spatial meaning in the context of some classical urban concerns around what the city is and what its social effects are.

There are other more generous ways of reading Auroville, for example, in the context of what Smriti Srinivas (2015: 121–58) refers to as ‘the Indian New Age’ with its correspondent utopian thinking, belief in self-spirituality, empowerment through somatic techniques, affective community, and local self-sufficiency. Indeed, from the outset Auroville was envisioned as an avowedly post-colonial city that would avoid the worst wrongs of colonialism, including the constraints of national alliance, global capitalism, racism and religious conflict (Namakkal, 2012: 74). It was conceived as a place that would bridge a set of binaries, including East and West, past and future, rich and poor (*ibid.*: 80). Even though the extent to which it has effectively managed this kind of bridging work is debatable, there is certainly promise and political potential to hold on to in the Auroville project. Its international reputation in the context of environmental and sustainable architecture is testimony to this, as are some of its experiments with post-capitalist forms of social organization. However, one dominant binary that was foundational to Auroville’s existence and has subsequently remained quite rigidly and problematically in place is the binary of country and the city. As Raymond Williams (1975: 9–17) has argued, the city has long been regarded as a human achievement; that which has been humanly crafted and thus disambiguated from the countryside, that bastion of tradition, sameness and timelessness. To this extent, the experience and imagination of cityness is still closely connected with the experience of the future (*ibid.*: 326), not least in the context of imperialism where the liberal concept of progress, of improvement,

19 Though the tensions around the current intentions for putatively ‘urban’ development and organic slow growth are key to this article, the suite of reasons for these new and very current political directives are beyond the scope of this article. For more on the Hindu nationalist BJP government’s intention to champion Sri Aurobindo Ghosh’s ostensibly secular teachings as an early proponent of Hindutva ideology, see Ellis-Petersen (2022).

and of civilization, was spatially and imaginatively so imbricated with the colonial city (Perera, 1998; Legg, 2007; Chatterjee *et al.*, 2017). Thus if, as Namakkal (2012: 82) suggests, Aurovillian efforts at decolonization failed to provide the rupture necessary to end established colonial hierarchies of race, class and caste, then this article has shown how the spatial binary of city and village—a binary which in its own postcolonial historical context is also a hierarchy—has been centrally implicated in that failure. As textual referent, spatial promise, and performative category, in this context 'the city' both produces and governs social and spatial life in this part of Tamil Nadu.

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