The Adventure of Auroville Was Calling Me ...

After many years of forward-thinking professional work and idealistic service, personal trials, and solo travels throughout rural Asia, English-born Helen chose to build the rest of her life in the City of Dawn, contributing her many skills and enthusiasm. She became an official Aurovillian in early 2021 and says “Auroville continues to fascinate me every single day. I feel lucky and inspired to be surrounded by so many people of such diverse backgrounds bound together through their passion to discover new ways to live.” We are very happy to share her inspiring views and journey.

I always felt there was something critical missing in my life. It just took me a while to figure out that what was calling me was the adventure of Auroville.

Growing up I had a sense that I was only living on the surface of life. I tried to fit into the world I was born into (in England) as best I could, but I felt stifled by the concrete environment, confused by a culture that valued money over people, and disorientated by an inner yearning for something more. It seemed like I had somehow forgotten or misplaced something of great value, like I was waking from a dream. Thankfully I had a kind, loving family who valued nature, encouraged me to question the world, and gave me the freedom and respect to explore who I am. As a teenager I spent hours searching for this elusive ‘something more’ in the occult section of the local library before branching out to philosophy books. I read all about meditation and was curious to learn more, but there were few opportunities for this where I grew up in Essex.
I Helen, with the blue skirt, in Essex,

The nearest chance I got was when the Transcendental Meditation people came to town. However the cost of their teachings was way out of my pocket money budget.

I was curious about what was missing not only at the individual level but also at a societal one - why people live together, how we govern ourselves, how we make decisions, how we care for each other, and what gives our life meaning. So I studied Social Policy at university. Then later I saw how the structures we create (our places and economies) also play critical roles in shaping the interactions between people, so I studied Urban Regeneration for my Masters degree.

For over a decade I worked for a government regeneration agency tasked to experiment with how we could create better, more sustainable places. This meant exploring how new and existing places could be designed to minimise their environmental impact whilst having strong and resilient economies and high levels of social cohesion and wellbeing. My role was to discover what factors were critical to success and then weave these learnings into policy, procedures, guidance and training programs. Incredibly this meant I was paid to travel and learn from so many interesting places and projects across the UK and Europe.

However, soon after I reached the age of 30 the long drawn out death of one of my closest friends and a complicated divorce meant I needed some time out of my life just to breathe. I quit the job that I loved and decided to head to India.

When I say ‘decided’ there wasn’t much -mental process involved. I simply let myself be guided by my instincts both to India and to Auroville - a place a colleague had read about and thought sounded ‘quite interesting’. 
This first trip to Auroville changed me deeply. I stayed in Aspiration so now whenever I smell the Maroma incense it transports me back to that time.

At a mental level I certainly found Auroville to be both interesting and intriguing. I encountered many new ideas, approaches and people which enabled me to look through fresh eyes. I was impressed by how a community could work together over decades to create something as incredible as the Matrimandir.

I was also curious how cities in the UK would be different if urban designers meditated on rooftops before meetings, opening themselves for divine inspiration as the Dreamcatchers did.

But the real change came at a much deeper level. On the morning of 21st February 2008 I received the news that my ex-husband had died. I took this call on the balcony at Town Hall, staring out at the newly completed Matrimandir as I absorbed the words. I was not then aware that I was on a pivot point between my future and my past.

In processing the deaths of those two young beings who had been such a large part of my life I understood how essential it is to live your life according to the deepest truth you can find within. Not to be on the surface trying to fit other people’s expectations and needs, or chasing after endless fleeting desires.

This was the time when I first encountered the teachings of The Mother and Sri Aurobindo and there was an immediate inner resonance.

However, it wasn’t yet the time for me to stay. I was eager to see how I could bring some of these new-found learnings back to my previous world. So I worked for another couple of years in London, mainly for a government think tank on sustainable development. We were a small team trying to convince Government ministers to learn from places like Auroville, encouraging them to fundamentally rethink the basis of the UK economy and take a more integrated and holistic approach to how we build, fund and govern our places.

Over this time I also worked as a policy advisor for the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment. I saw that whilst many new ‘eco’ buildings had been created, they often failed to deliver the intended impact. It seemed to me that this was often because whilst the physical form had changed, the consciousness of those who used the buildings and spaces hadn’t.

Alongside this it was clear that whilst the technical and financing solutions to create better places were available, the real barrier was the inability of different people, organisations and belief systems to work together.

So I soon felt the calling to head back east to delve deeper within and to understand what is needed to create wider shifts in consciousness.

I had seen how much immersing myself in different cultures helped me to understand what parts of me are fabrications of society and where the truth really is. Putting myself in a different context, with different people time and time again, gave a real clarity.

So I meandered slowly alone by train from London to Beijing through Siberia and Mongolia, living with local people where possible. I spent the next few years moving between cultures and countries learning and unlearning all I could.
In Mongolia

On the summits of Nepal
One of the other places that touched me deeply in this time was Baba Amte’s ‘Anandwan’ community which was forged out of much personal hardship, compassion and kindness to give a home and hope to the leprosy-afflicted. And also his son Prakash’s ‘Lok Biradari Prakalp’ project which provides healthcare and education to the Madia-Gond tribe along with a home for orphaned animals.

With Prakash Amte

During these times I often found myself back in Auroville ... and towards the end of my travels I met my now husband Kardash (a beautiful Russian-born Australian) in Pokhara, Nepal.
We travelled together and he also found a sense of resonance and belonging in Auroville. At some point we decided it was where we both wanted to be, although life somehow intervened and it was five years before we made the move.

During this time we mostly lived in Australia where I worked to reduce community-level carbon emissions for a local municipality. This involved trialling new technologies and funding mechanisms to ensure that those in apartments and rental properties could benefit from solar.

We also explored how the negative health impacts of living in built-up areas during increasingly hot summers could be mitigated through building design and green infrastructure. In my spare time I established a charity to promote the science of happiness and taught yoga and meditation.

Despite this interesting and super-rewarding work, the inner calling from Auroville to join the 'great adventure' was just too strong. So we moved here as pre-newcomers in 2018.

I remember sitting under the Banyan Tree for New Year celebrations that first year unable to stop the tears pouring from my eyes. It felt like I was home. It’s hard to describe but for me Auroville is the only place in the world where I feel all parts of my being are truly aligned.

Much of Auroville fascinates me. This made it hard to decide where to focus my energies initially, but I felt the biggest learning opportunity (and where I hoped I could add value) was working with Koodam. So for my newcomer period I joined Koodam, providing facilitation support for many meetings and processes. I enjoyed working with the team a lot and, as anticipated, it gave me an opportunity to see the community functioning from many different perspectives.

My mentor, Kathy, also recruited me (in my first few days as a newcomer) to be part of a team exploring how a Citizens’ Assembly process could have relevance for Auroville. This model has started to gain traction globally as an effective way to enable wide, diverse participation in community decision-making. It provides safe spaces in which participants can learn about complex ideas and through small group discussions can discover ways forward.
I’m forever grateful that I was invited to this team as I met many beautiful, passionate and inspiring Aurovilians, both in the organising team and in those who participated in the pilot Citizens Assembly. The Citizens Assembly model itself also seemed to work well and we learnt a lot about what type of topics it works for, the time and support needed, and how to present information in an understandable way. Lately we have been able to utilise some of those learnings to support both the Dreamweaving and a participatory community budgeting process too. I hope that the Citizens Assembly approach can evolve as one of many community decision-making tools in Auroville.

During the first lockdown I was grateful for the time and space to delve deeper into the teachings of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother through participation in the on-line Swadhyaya program. It was a powerful experience to connect with students across India all eagerly exploring different aspects of the teachings.

Given my previous work on happiness I was keen to focus my project on this aspect of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother's teachings. I found there to be much correlation between the ‘science’ of happiness and Sri Aurobindo and The Mother's writings on this topic. However the science is still very limited in what it can measure, so the teachings provide a much richer, vaster, deeper wisdom.

Over the past year my energies have been mainly focused in exploring what the potential is for Auroville’s projects to flourish and create a positive impact for Auroville, the bioregion and beyond. I worked on this project with Manjula and we were supported by both SAIIER’s research platform and Matthew and Binah (from AVI USA). This work saw us speak with almost 100 Aurovilians to understand what the potential is for Auroville's projects to grow, and what is
holding them back. It was an incredible experience for me to meet so many people and hear about the diverse works they have dedicated much of their lives to.

I saw how the endeavours of Aurovilians and those who work alongside them had created innovative approaches and products in sustainable construction, alternative health, education, reforestation, renewable energy as well as many local employment opportunities. I was impressed to see that several projects were working with India's leading companies to help them find solutions to their needs - and one was even exporting machinery to Elon Musk!

I also saw that it takes something really different to create a project in Auroville. As there is no ownership of projects, these people dedicate their time, passion and energy to their work not to get rich, but instead to contribute to Auroville and somehow make a difference in the world. I saw such care, thought and devotion in these projects. From our exploration, we found that many of those teams who are interested in growing are held back by lack of skills, capacity and technical support. So we have established a new service unit - Flourish - which we hope will be able to provide support and build skills in this area.

On a personal level, I'm finding that Auroville can sometimes be very challenging, but in a way that keeps me on my toes. I am often pushed to reflect at a very deep level on who 'I' am, and who 'we' and 'they' are. Whilst the answers to this can be uncomfortable at times, I feel these reflections are a critical part of the work here if Auroville is to manifest a form of human unity which has a real relevance for the wider humanity. Auroville continues to fascinate me every single day. I feel lucky and inspired to be surrounded by so many people of such diverse backgrounds bound together through their passion to discover new ways to live.

Helen, Auroville, February 2022