

## Consciousness and Indian-ness

### *Making Design “Good”*

*“That which is working against sustainable design is the consciousness of designers. Sorry if this is moralistic, but it’s my observation . . . those who succeed have this consciousness through which you feel a need for holistic design.”*

(DR. C.L. GUPTA, SOLAR ENERGY UNIT, SRI AUROBINDO ASHRAM/AUROVILLE)<sup>1</sup>

*“We don’t have to look outward; we have to look inward, toward our own history. We invented environmental architecture! Look at the Vastu Shastras. . . . But you won’t find that (written) in LEED standards.”*

(DR. C.L. GUPTA, SOLAR ENERGY UNIT, SRI AUROBINDO ASHRAM/AUROVILLE)<sup>2</sup>

This chapter explores moments when RSIEA training invoked specific claims about historical lifeways, categorized these as “Indian,” and used them to further explicate ideas and techniques of “good design.” Focusing on study tours and destinations, I note how a specific construction of Indian-ness was generated in the process of further explicating RSIEA’s notion of good design.

With every training cycle, the suite of field visits featured in RSIEA’s curriculum completely changed, with the one exception being the visit to Auroville. In the particular semesters I draw from below, our destinations included several sites in Bangaluru, Auroville, Chennai, and an “eco-village” north of Mumbai. Since specific field study destinations changed from semester to semester, however, my primary aim is not to provide an exhaustive critique of the sites themselves, in part because doing so risks a somewhat overdetermined attribution of importance to them. Instead, I wish to identify and better understand specific moments when a design idea or physical feature of one of these sites was used to convey a specific dimension of the RSIEA concept of good design. I then show how these ideas and features were used to construct a specific category of “Indian-ness,” sufficiently expansive to provide a place for a RSIEA group populated with students

and faculty of Muslim, Hindu, Jain, Parsi, Christian, Jewish, and other origins. In a manner quite peculiar for a political era punctuated by a powerful politics of Hindu nationalism, I show that in forging an idea of “Indian-ness” as part of good design, the study tours reinforced a pervasive notion that environmental concerns, when understood as universals, not only transcend existing social and political disparities, but enable social categories capable of neutralizing otherwise volatile forms of social difference. In other words, by joining good design to a notion of Indian-ness, RSIEA’s version of environmental architecture activated a particular kind of environmental affinity—an instance in which shared environmental imaginaries enable social collectives, solidarities, and accepted universals that find their basis in a shared idea of a common environment.<sup>3</sup> In a moment in Indian history marked by deeply and often dangerously anti-secular movements, mobilizing a notion that environmental concerns may not only be socially unifying but also potentially secularizing warrants close attention.<sup>4</sup>

At the scale of the region, then, Indian-ness in this environmental context was constructed as unifying, but in this chapter it is equally important to note that at the scale of global environmental discourse, the converse was true: the construction of Indian-ness associated with good design also provided a counterpoint to “Western” values, concepts, and practices of sustainability. That tension, and its experiential production, marks the central focus of this chapter.

In the curated experience of each site visit, faculty and program leaders narrated a version of Indian design history that “knew” distinctive modes of sustainability. Although the environmental conditions in the India of the present may be unprecedented, the consequent message was that their remedies could find resonance with, or may even be drawn from, certain environmental sensitivities that were evident in historical design concepts and practices.

A wealth of existing scholarship has critiqued the long history of discursive linkages between ideas of broadly-construed good design and notions of “Indian” history and identity. S. Paniker (2008), for example, describes the discursive florescence linking “wise” architectural design and narratives of Indian history that emerged in the wake of Indira Gandhi’s assassination and ensuing political unrest. Among others, Lang et al. (1997) claimed in *Architecture and Independence* that this period witnessed a “marked shift in the architectural context, toward more traditional (Vedic and Shastraic) and vernacular ways of building which were being re-evaluated by both users and professionals as capable of offering potentially more pragmatic solutions to the perennial problems of housing and climate in India.”<sup>5</sup> In this chapter, I aim to better understand how a contemporary experiential and pedagogical attempt to explicate good design and Indian-ness in environmental architecture formed the basis for a RSIEA environmental affinity.

As is typically the case in many kinds of architecture degree programs in India, field trips form a vital cornerstone of RSIEA's two-year postgraduate certification program in Environmental Architecture. Students are offered organized study itineraries to destinations outside of Mumbai at relatively affordable rates, and they are strongly encouraged, though not required, to attend. The trips often introduce a given semester, and are timed to give a conceptual and experiential foundation for the technical training offered in the classroom. They also attempt to produce a less tangible, but nevertheless important, sense of solidarity and belonging among students. This in turn ensures that the cooperative, team-based projects and assignments students regularly undertake may be completed effectively. While the study trips included in the curriculum over the course of this research included some city destinations, most were non-city sites. This gave the tours the added appeal of opportunities to "escape the city" and experience "fuller" versions of non-city nature while studying environmental architecture.

By far the most popular among RSIEA students, and most regularly offered, tour is to the aforementioned experimental city and intentional community associated with the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Tamil Nadu, Auroville. Not far from the ashram in Pondicherry, this city of roughly two thousand has explicitly aspired, since its founding in 1968 by the followers of the Indian spiritual leaders Sri Aurobindo and Mira Richard (known more commonly as the Mother), to become, as the city professes and its residents repeated to us, "the city the earth needs." Consider this RSIEA student's description of her personal anticipation of the "Toward Sustainable Habitats" study tour in Auroville:

Auroville has had, well, a certain "aura" about it. As a student of architecture, I had been hearing about Auroville for a number of years but never had the opportunity to visit it. I had heard from a number of friends and colleagues, who had visited the place to attend workshops, about what a fabulous place it was, but was unable to comprehend it completely not having had any first-hand experience myself. That finally changed when we were taken to Auroville for the workshop "Towards Sustainable Habitats," being conducted by the Centre for Scientific Research, as part of our M. Arch course. The topic or subject matter for the workshop itself was so intriguing; I found myself looking forward to the workshop even more. I think it has something to do with having lived in Mumbai for most of my life and as such, never having had the opportunity to experience anything other than the crowd, noise, and the concrete jungle that is this city. I was looking forward to experiencing another way of life, and I was not disappointed.<sup>7</sup>

One of the groups I accompanied to Auroville travelled to Chennai via rail or air, and then a shared bus from Chennai, with additional brief stops en route. On this trip, stops included two sites typically used by school groups of many ages for narrating "Indian" history and vernacular forms, Dakshinachitra and Mahabalipuram.

Before describing the Dakshinachitra / Mahabalipuram / Auroville trip in more detail, I note here the second study tour that I will recount later. Like the

Auroville tour, a study tour to Govardhan Ashram and Eco-village occurred near the beginning of the new semester, in March of 2012. The two day, three night trip involved a bus journey to the 60-acre ashram and eco-village site at Galtar, about 100 km north of Mumbai and located in the Sahayadri Mountains. Among other attributes, this area enjoys a “biodiversity hotspot” designation from the International Union for the Conservation of Nature. Like Auroville, Govardhan has explicit links to an internationally recognized and organized spiritual practice and philosophy. In the words of its own promotional material, the ashram is “a project dedicated to His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, Founder and Archarya of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKON) and inspired by Radhanath Swami.” Govardhan is just one of the more than five hundred ISKON-affiliated temples, ashrams, centers, schools, and restaurants across the world.

Yet unlike the oft-traveled destination of Auroville, Govardhan was a relatively young initiative, established only in 2003 and still in stages of construction in 2012. The RSIEA trip was experimental; ours was the first tour RSIEA made, and so faculty in particular were not only seeking to use it for teaching, but also learning for themselves whether it was an appropriate field study site. Govardhan did not enjoy the same anticipatory mystique that students attributed to Auroville, but the promise of a self-professed “eco-village” made the journey appealing nevertheless.

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The social and pedagogical process of linking specific study site attributes to good design and Indian-ness often hinged on overt or implied narrations of spirituality and “consciousness.” While RSIEA faculty and students rarely invoked specific religious texts to explain good design, they did make repeated references to “spiritual practice” and “tradition.”

In Auroville, the city’s very existence is predicated on adherence to the spiritual interpretations, teachings, and philosophy of Sri Aurobindo and his primary follower, Mira Richard (“The Mother”). Sri Aurobindo famously reinterpreted a range of Vedic texts; his “elaborations” or “revisions,” depending on one’s point of view, led him to develop his philosophy of Integral Yoga. To follow Aurobindo, then, is to adopt Integral Yoga as foundational to correct and appropriate spiritual engagement in the contemporary world. Despite this, our field visit to Auroville never detailed, or even mentioned, Aurobindo’s philosophy. While there was a brief orientation to the founders of the ashram and to the city, our Auroville program was dominated by an agenda framed as its title implied: *Toward Sustainable Habitats*. A less overt but nevertheless omnipresent sense of reverence for something repeatedly referred to as Indian “history” or “wisdom” infused the Auroville-based environmental architecture learning experience.

By contrast, our hosts at Govardhan Ashram and Eco-village professed an overt commitment to what they called the “Vedic lifestyle,” the site represents

itself publically, in fact, as a living demonstration thereof. Consider the following excerpt from the organization's promotional literature:

Govardhan Eco-village illustrates "Simple Living & High Thinking"—a principle which is so succinct, yet profound, and formed the basis of life in the bygone age of wisdom. Life in the Vedic times was focused on Service, but not on exploitation; this was the cardinal rule of living and the very essence of people's dealings—with each other and that with Mother Nature. With the concepts of eco living being innate, the Vedic lifestyle was truly an eco friendly way of living life as instanced in the timeless Vedic scriptures like SrimadBhagavatam and Bhagavad-Gita. We at Govardhan Eco-village hope to present this model to the world as an alternative way of lifestyle and perhaps a solution to the impending ecological crisis. . . . The purpose behind Govardhan Eco-village is twofold—one is to present a sustainable living model based on community living and second is to educate people in the field of traditional sciences including Yoga and spirituality. . . . Since its inception in the year 2003, Govardhan Eco-village has made steady progress in Organic farming, Cow protection, Education, Rural development, Alternative energy, Eco friendly constructions and Sustainable living. In the scenario where environmental crisis is on the rise, Govardhan Eco-village is an example of living in harmony with nature.<sup>8</sup>

Here, certain modes of relating to environmental processes and resources are termed the "traditional sciences;" these are then undertaken as demonstrative of the ashram community's commitment to the "Vedic basis" for sustainable architecture and, in fact, all aspects of sustainability's moral parameters in social life.<sup>9</sup>

Study tours to these sites inevitably focused on the architectural practices and features to be observed in each, but our hosts' narrations of the principles of good design that produced the places themselves offered a kind of contemporary evidence that the *idea* of Indian history—less as a bundle of texts or repertoire of rituals than as an enduring set of wise guidelines for environmentally responsible living—was thriving in each site's material form. This precolonial historical "basis" for the material and social dimensions of sustainability that students could observe in real time and form underpinned consequent claims that linked good-design in environmental architecture to a specific construction of "Indian" identity.

This does not, of course, mean that faculty and students automatically and uncritically accepted those claims. Full or even partial acceptance was never pre-configured, or complete. Nevertheless, the socially inclusive and simultaneously spiritual and secularizing dimensions of historical narratives of Indian good design gave it a particular appeal.

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Once assembled in Chennai, our bus filled with eighteen architect-students, faculty, and one visiting anthropologist made its way toward Auroville. En route, we made intermediary stops, the first of which was at Dakshinachitra . A site described in its own promotional literature as "a center for the living traditions

of art, folk performing arts, and architecture of India,” Dakshinachitra opened in 1996 as a project of a non-profit organization called the Madras Craft Foundation. The complex was designed by the architect Laurie Baker and is widely visited by students of architecture and other interests alike.

Our stop there was unstructured, so there was no singularly narrated experience of the place. Students moved in small, self-selecting groups through a landscape of what the site’s promotional literature calls “heritage houses,” each labeled and organized along streetscapes modeled after Southern Indian regional vernacular architectural styles. In all, there were seventeen structures to explore, and the walk between them was an experiential sampling of specific and highly stylized representations of what were referred to as “typical” or “authentic” South Indian vernacular architectural forms. Explanatory plaques associated each structure with specific southern regions and identity groups.

Moving between different clusters of students and faculty, I walked from built form to built form, experiencing the physicality of carefully rendered re-creations with names like, “Kerala House” and “Syrian Christian House.” One environmental architecture student wrote, in a post-trip reflection: “(this place) had the magnificent character and style of Kerala, Tamilnadu, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. It (had) architectural details and elements which you never get to see in one place. It was a place where you can find all types of traditional architecture of South India.”<sup>10</sup>

In the absence of a scripted tour or single guide, our movement across this spectacle of historical architectural styles prompted rich conversation. Students and faculty noted certain attributes for their aesthetic qualities and commented on the extent to which certain building features promoted thermal comfort, natural lighting, practical uses of regional materials, and other aspects of good design.

Though interpretive plaques marked each building as indicative of an historical place and identity group, there were no references to the social hierarchy and power relations that would have produced vernacular spaces in any specific moment in history. Offering no context for a given building’s historical maker or dweller, to say nothing of their social positionality, had the effect of bundling all of the structures together as a set of politically neutral, regionally representative examples of good design, each at risk of becoming, or already, lost or unfamiliar forms in the postcolonial modern present. The buildings were meticulously constructed and presented as both exhibits and as forms to be traversed, explored, and experienced. Moving between clusters of students, I was drawn into conversations about the aesthetic contrast between the vernacular homes and the contemporary, modern building forms we had just left behind in Chennai.

With Dakshinachitra the first stop on the tour, we began by physically moving through a curated cluster of regional vernacular forms that stood for a certain dimension of the regional past, seeking in them good design techniques for the present. At the same time, we were locating forms and ideas through which to trace the regional origins of “Indian” sustainability.

The student reflection noted earlier went on to observe:

Dakshinachitra, which is a craft centre and exhibition space all rolled in one, was a fabulous campus. . . . Stopping here, I felt that our workshop on “Sustainable Habitats” had already commenced because these homes were prototypes of the kind of life that was till we became industrialised and consumerist.<sup>11</sup>

A historical sentimentality thus joined with the aesthetics of the forms, leaving questions about the selectivity, stylization, or power relations embedded in those same forms of little expressed interest to most students. The point, it seemed, was not to critique their historical context, but rather to seek in the forms a set of qualities that could be regarded as enduring, and therefore timeless; here was a first hint of attributing a socially neutralizing power to this particular idea of sustainability.

Rao (2013) reminds us that such a quest to recover “harmonious” architectural technique from a vernacular past almost erased in the industrial present is not new. For him, it is a 1939 essay that epitomizes this for the case of Mumbai. Titled “Traditional Domestic Architecture of Bombay,” Rao writes that the author, Janardan Shastri, “appeared to sense that something harmonious was being irrevocably destroyed by planned, regulated building of the sort undertaken by certified professional architects.”<sup>12</sup> The essay gives a historical account of Bombay and relates different social groups to different types of dwellings. In it,

He selected houses he considered “typical” of some of the older neighborhoods of the city, such as the Fort, Kalbadevi, Girgaum, Parel, and Mahim. The mediating link between the people and their dwellings was, for Shastri, religion or dharma. Hindu life was so saturated with the notion of dharma, a concept that cannot be abstracted into a category like “religion,” that it also suffused the Hindu dwelling.<sup>13</sup>

This in turn created, according to Shastri, aesthetic continuity. The coming of the Portuguese, and eventually the British, brought changes that Shastri uses to explain the break that ensued; there is deep nostalgia in this piece “for a time when buildings were authentically Indian.”<sup>14</sup> A major force in the disruption of an imagined precolonial harmony is the hybridized figure of the builder, contractor, and developer: “In the absence of an overarching Hindu cosmology, redemption from the godless, profit-seeking purgatory that is the modern city is only offered in the synthetic vision of the architect.”<sup>15</sup>

Another series in which Rao takes interest appears in the *Journal of the Indian Institute of Architects* called “Lesser Architecture of Bombay.” These pieces, which appeared in the 1930s, “represented an acknowledgment of the widening understanding of what constituted architecture in the Indian context. “Most importantly,” he argues, “this series adumbrates a compromise between “traditional” and “modern” dwellings.”<sup>16</sup>

It is useful here to underscore the malleability of terms like “vernacular” and “traditional,” particularly in the instances of environmental learning that took

place on RSIEA field visits. Tamara Sears (2001) provides a useful distinction between these terms when she calls vernacular “something that grows out of lived experience, that is embedded in the social, cultural, and environmental conditions in which people conduct daily activities, and is therefore intuitive to the people who produce it.”<sup>17</sup> Vernacular architecture, then, can signal the “informal, usually domestic architecture that is rooted in local tradition and is generally produced by craftsmen with little or no formal academic training.”<sup>18</sup> Sears distinguishes this from “tradition” as “a larger category, encompassing a variety of assimilated phenomena, of which “vernacular” becomes one part.”<sup>19</sup> Distinguished in this way, we notice that the vernacular is dynamic, so moments when it is “fixed” in time and reproduced as valuable, such as in the structures we toured at Dakshinachitra—and the specific contents, materials, styles, and forms that were implicated as a result—are important for understanding the construction of “Indian-ness” that informed the RSIEA concept of good design. Sears continues:

In the discourse of colonialism, vernacular was seen as something inherently indigenuous, pre-modern, and uninformed by the concept of civilized society emerging from the enlightenment. In more recent times, vernacular and traditional architecture has become a glorified notion, and, as Miki Desai noted, an aristocratic folk paradigm often emerges when scholars and practitioners talk about tradition. The authenticity of the vernacular is often praised, and educated scholars, preservationists and other elites often seek to save what they see as a tradition going extinct in the face of the onslaught of rapid changes brought on by modernity.<sup>20</sup>

Clear tensions emerge here, as the agenda at Dakshinachitra was to learn good design techniques from a historical vernacular: as we noted points of evidence of good design, the puzzle was whether and how we might import those elements from the past to the present was quite obvious, as was the impossibility of making so many of those same forms relevant in the population-dense urban context of Mumbai itself. Perhaps in this way, our visit to Dakshinachitra was less an encounter with the vernacular for its demonstration of “assimilation, change and hybridity (as) ongoing processes,” and more of a gesture of “sifting through (the vernacular) to find the truly pure.”<sup>21</sup> At least, it seemed, the truly “good” in good design.

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After a few hours touring Dakshinachitra, the group returned to our bus and journeyed further to the coastal town of Mahabalipuram. A significant seaport as early as the first century, Mahabalipuram is historically associated with the Pallava Dynasty and is comprised of dozens of carved rock structures that remain essentially intact. These include magnificent rock-cut temples, sculptures and reliefs.

The site was a remarkable spectacle of resilient built forms, made even more powerful by the harsh coastal setting. A coastal location may signal automatic vulnerability in an era of climate change, but Mahabalipuram seemed to embody



resilience—its structures still standing, and remarkably intact, after centuries of coastal weather and change.

Our group traversed this site with a palpable air of reverence. In contrast to Dakshinachitra, this was a cluster of built forms that needed no reconstruction or re-enactment. These forms, a RSIEA faculty member reminded the group, were widely considered to mark the material beginnings of Dravidian architecture; before us were striking shrines to Shiva, Vishnu, and other Hindu deities that had withstood centuries in a harsh coastal climate. Nearly all of the RSIEA students spoke of learning of Mahabalipuram in their school textbooks, and many had visited the site in past field trips. This place had iconic, national identity-making power far broader than our good design mission, but in this context it stood as evidence that good design could be traced to deeply histories.

As I walked among faculty, one noted that the diversity of forms at Mahabalipuram indicated that the area was also a center for teaching, joking that we should see it as a kind of analogue to RSIEA. “Their carving skills are our environmental architecture skills,” she said. The point was not lost in the laughter; we were students on what may have been a site of ancient learning, seeing before us a striking example of efficient, undeniably resilient use of local materials. As we boarded the bus, Dr. Joshi joked with a student, saying, “See again! Sustainability is just ancient common sense!”

I note again that no mention was made of how this site was invoked, or why, in other teaching contexts, to say nothing of critiquing its use in constructing narratives of Indian national identity. Our collective purpose seemed focused on the structures and their resilience, not the social or political dimensions of the past they emerged in or the present that glorified them. To do so, after all, risked attaching this place to certain social identities or foregrounding power relations that, in the good design sociality of RSIEA, found no explicit place or endorsement. If each site simply illuminated some dimension of a multi-dimensional notion of Indian-ness, then each could provide welcome and potentially useful guidance in service of good design.

We boarded the bus yet again to complete the journey to the place that so many students were eager to experience, Auroville. Through many hours on the bus, a Tamil film, sing-alongs, and constant laughter consumed our attention. A light, almost celebratory air of excitement combined with the freedom of the journey far from home and the hours passed quickly. By the time we reached Auroville, the sun had long since set, and a deep darkness veiled our surroundings. Tired, we poured out of the bus, and into large, shared dormitory spaces in a ferro-cement building called Mitra. We set down our bedrolls, and soon fell asleep.

At the light of sunrise, we gathered around the two massive teakettles that had appeared on the landing. Within half an hour we climbed back on the bus, only to arrive just a short drive later at Auroville’s Center for Scientific Research. As we disembarked, it was clear that our training at Auroville would begin here. We

marched up its stairs, and into formation for the women to receive jasmine hair garlands, for all of us to pick up our information packets.

Midway through the week's itinerary was a group trip to the Matrimundir, the city's iconic spiritual center, and in many ways its distinguishing global symbol. The mundir's unmistakable spherical form, plated in gold and fused with glass, underscores the influence of Sri Aurobindo's religious philosophy on the city and its making; the unique design also makes clear that the "city the earth needs" traces its basis to a specific spiritual practice that has historically guided its approach to urban design.

The presence of the mundir on our *Toward Sustainable Habitats* itinerary suggested that this religious center also had techniques and concepts of good design to impart. Formal lectures would later refer to the Matrimundir as a symbol of "perfect human consciousness emergent from the earth, or from the old, unsustainable human consciousness."<sup>22</sup> This would be the conceptual frame through which Auroville's instructors would narrate the city's built forms throughout the week.

As we settled in our classroom seats, our primary instructor introduced himself by his first name, Tency. His accented English suggested Austrian or German origin, and the ashen hair swept over his neck invoked a kind of bohemian aesthetic. His voice was gentle but austere as he delivered his first lecture. It felt somewhat disjointed, then, when Tency invited us to begin our week of studying "sustainable habitats" by discussing our personal passions. My field notes from this first session read,

(Tency) distributes name tags and asks that we identify our personal passion as he hands us our tag. My name is read first, and I find myself anxiously blurting that my passion is teaching and learning. I am immediately struck by how utterly different Tency's pedagogical style is from the classrooms back at the RSIEA, and I wonder how these architect/students will respond to his style . . . After we each somewhat uncomfortably state our passion, Tency begins a puzzling presentation. It features a slide of the Rosetta stone, slides showing other examples of carved stone tablets, and it seems to be generally about writing systems. I try to discern a clear pedagogical message, but I can't. Tency concludes this section by telling us that each day we'll begin with a short "passion presentation," and then we will listen to some music. He then plays that day's music, a video of a French fusion musician flanked by Hindustani classical musicians. The musician strums his guitar in combination with a tabla and sitar player.

As the music ended, Tency shared a series of images. A first slide read, "THE CITY THE EARTH NEEDS." He acknowledged that while this may sound like an arrogant label for Auroville, it was simply a declaration made by The Mother, and something Aurovillians truly believed. This was the first time we heard an explicit reference to The Mother by name, but the ubiquity of her photo in the buildings we had visited made her difficult to ignore. Tency explained that those who live in

Auroville “don’t like a lot of publicity,” and that as an experiment in sustainable living, the city has “gone through some tough times.” “All around us,” he continued, we see that we are not on a planet that is solving its problems, so perhaps this is, despite its flaws, truly the city the earth needs.” He then framed the week’s course on Sustainable Habitats as a guide to some of the steps we can take—as architects and as human beings—to actualize that needed city. “The conditions in which we live are a result of our state of consciousness,” he said. “The external, built world reflects only our inner state of being.”

As noted in a prior chapter, Auroville was founded in 1968 by the followers of Sri Aurobindo and Mira Richard (the Mother). Its master plan is set on 3500 acres, arranged in a circle that is 2.5 km in diameter. Eighty percent of the land area in the master plan is owned by Auroville, but Tency explained that real estate values in the region were skyrocketing, and development pressures on the remaining land that Aurovillians wished to acquire was intense. Tency offered no details of the city’s formal governmental or institutional structure, nor did we glean the city’s relationship to the Indian state of Tamil Nadu, in which it is located.<sup>23</sup> Instead, Tency offered us Auroville’s ecological origin story.

Nearly all of the land inside of Auroville’s contemporary boundaries was, he said, severely degraded forest when Sri Aurobindo’s followers first committed to building the city. Their initial grueling task was to re-vegetate the landscape; this was nothing short of a massive undertaking, and it formed the basis for regarding Auroville as a fundamentally “green” city.

Tency continued by noting the key biophysical challenges facing those who design the city’s buildingscape and conduct its urban planning. In 2012, Auroville’s population was only two thousand persons (representing forty nationalities), but its founding mission was to grow to a city of fifty thousand. In order to do this while remaining ecologically viable, the city would need to secure forested “greenbelts” on its periphery, and ensure a stable and adequate water supply. Water was a particularly vexing factor, and so, Tency explained, as the city has grown so too have experiments with urban-scale and building-scale techniques of water recycling, wastewater treatment, and decentralized water purification. Tency also discussed the challenges of providing adequate and ecologically viable energy supplies; he noted Auroville’s extensive use of photovoltaic technologies and energy-efficient thermal comfort strategies. Rather than air conditioning, for instance, Auroville buildings use in-house dehumidifiers, which allowed them to achieve at least a quarter reduction in energy use relative to conventional air conditioners.

Tency concluded his introductory lecture by declaring that, “this is a city that desires and expects to grow.” With that, we were invited to share tea on the building’s sunny terrace. When we reconvened, the session assumed contours more familiar to a roomful of architecture students; a landscape architect introduced as Aditya, and a town planner introduced as Lata, offered more substantive ecological

overviews of the city, and the sustainability principles that inform Auroville planning and design at multiple scales.

Aditya used an international planning and landscape design genealogy to frame his lecture. He described his primary inspirations as Ian McHarg, whom he called “the father of ecological planning” and the American author of *Design with Nature*, and Mary Jane Coulter, an early twentieth century American architect whom he called a “landscape-sensitive architect.”<sup>24</sup> He then offered a list of thematic criteria essential to designing for sustainability at large scales. These included an analysis of the site’s biophysical history, which he called its “ecohistory,” a long-term trend analysis for hydrological patterns, clear articulation of the site’s topography and water regime, and, in the category he called “human ecology,” demographics, land use and control regimes, transport networks, and future physical projects. These combined with a basic physical assessment—climate, geology, soil types, surface and subsurface hydrology, and biological flora and fauna—to form the baseline knowledge sufficient to proceed with good design.

But we were quickly reminded of our context as Aditya turned unexpectedly to the importance of the Mother’s vision for Auroville. He explained that the land development pressures outside of Auroville were unforeseen by the Mother; so too was the fact that older visions of ecological vitality which had valued greenbelts outside of cities would later be discredited and replaced by planning strategies that emphasize integrating green spaces *in* cities. “What we want to escape as we develop the city further, and as we try to influence land use policies around us, is the fate of becoming a weekend resort city,” he said. “Planning is awareness raising,” he continued, “because most people live life in a sleep mode.”

This last statement completed a narrative arc in which Aurovillian environmental architecture was described as a product of inner consciousness, specific techniques, and intentional social action. The field examples we would visit in the following days referred back to these elements; every site visit was led by that site’s creator or caretaker, and each was narrated for its value both in solving the specific biophysical challenges and for addressing the framing spiritual challenge to become the “city the earth needs.”

That first afternoon, we would visit a private home called “Newlands,” fully designed and built by a German architect who introduced herself as Regina. Tucked into the dense forest in a way that made it seem simultaneously integrated and distinct, the home was indeed an impressive example of ecologically integrated architecture. All of the materials, Regina told us, had come either directly from this forest or from the Auroville site. Using energy and machinery as minimally as possible, Regina had literally designed and built the home herself. The fourteen-year-old structure made extensive use of wattle and daub, particularly impressive given seasonal monsoon conditions in Auroville. As the first built form we encountered outside of a classroom setting, and as the first example of the

architectural experiments that were possible in a city like Auroville, the home made a significant impression on many of the students. One reflected later:

New Lands . . . was located in the green belt zone. Only naturally and locally available materials can be used for construction in this zone. And indeed this house belonged to this zone. With rammed mud walls and in situ seasoned wood and bamboo, this house was truly a master piece. The windows were framed with a type of seasoned and burnt bamboo known as Buddha's belly. The windows looked like a masterpiece by Gaudi. Nature was flowing in and out of the house. I was speechless.<sup>25</sup>

With some in the group charmed and others astonished, we moved on to Gaia Gardens, a large garden and multi-building yoga complex built and hosted by a man who introduced himself as Kireet. Here, we learned about the rainwater harvesting techniques used in the gardens, and we hiked Utility Canyon, a massive erosion-born canyon that has been a restoration focus in Auroville for decades. Kireet coordinates the financing and operation of a series of check dams intended to capture and redeposit Canyon silt, and in so doing stop large flows of runoff from further eroding the hillsides. Again, at each site, our hosts offered their personal story of inner consciousness development and its direct expression as environmental stewardship and even, in Kireet's case, environmental restoration. The students devoured the technical details of the designs, their consistent interest deepened by the repeated, passionately professed basis of these practices in "consciousness."

Very few of our instructors claimed South Asian descent, but by emphasizing that good design was fundamentally linked to "consciousness," they reinforced the idea that a unique, and longstanding, "Indian" wisdom was fundamental to the effectiveness of their work. By virtue of their diverse national and ethnic origins, they conveyed an inclusivity to the category as well; it had the communicative effect of backgrounding our differences so long as our common commitment to "sustainable habitats" through spiritual consciousness was constantly reinforced.

In the days that followed, conceptual and technical sessions further explicated good design through "sustainable habitats." Sessions like "Green Home Technologies," "Auroville's Architectural Diversity," and specialized course sequences on topics including decentralized water treatment strategies, local materials processing and use (stabilized compressed earth blocks and ferro-cement, in the case of Auroville), and renewable energy filled the schedule. We visited several other buildings, each with compelling names like, "Luminosity" or "Creativity." In every instance, those who guided us through the building described a relationship between consciousness and good design.

As our study tour was coming to a close, we reached our program at the Matrimandir. Unlike the other sites and other sessions, no host guided us through this day. The massive spherical building was not narrated for its sustainable aspects or building techniques, yet after many days of guided thinking, we were

conditioned to encounter it as at very least, a source of the consciousness so central to good design.

Student reflections like these, composed after the visit, emphasized the personal experience of consciousness that many described in connection with their time in the Matrimundir:

As one walks closer and closer to the Matrimandir the mystery of the architecture begins to unfold. The paths through the petals draw us towards the centre of the globe. Everything appears to converge . . . then we start to realise the existence of each golden concave disc on the globe. As one enters the mandir, we are asked to wear the socks that are provided. This is a transition zone, where one starts to stop thinking about the worldly endeavours. Then we enter the great hall . . . a spiraling ramp. The salmon pink ambience and the volunteers dressed in white give it a feel of a sci-fi space ship. Now the thoughts are guided towards the ray of light that emerges from the top and escapes into the floor. After this transition there is the meditation hall. A huge void with columns creating an isle for seating and circulation. It is extremely difficult to realise the scale of the space due to absence of any reference. Only the vertical ray of sun entering through the ceiling and entering into a crystal can be seen. There were no thoughts. Even after trying very hard to think, there were no thoughts. Just blankness. There was silence. Silence as I had never heard before. It was a silence that I defined as the “screaming silence.” Silence so intense that one could hear his own blood pressure. Silence that will make you realise . . . your own shoddy existence. The hazy white atmosphere was suddenly lit and I realised that the 15 minutes of meditation time was over. . . . The feeling after coming out was bliss.<sup>26</sup>

Walking into the room, nothing else existed. I walked right into the ultimate emptiness. The whiteness is both light and dark at the same time, casting sacred robes around every person. I sat, I breathed in the awe of this power, this perfection. Meditating, “om,” the sound of the universe came in and out through my every breath. I at once became the perfect sphere within which I sat, and this sphere grew outward to consume all of Auroville and all of the world. We were only allowed to remain for ten minutes, which was enough for the time. Exiting, I felt endlessly rejuvenated. I had deepened so much, emptied so much. I found a sense of peace that existed infinitely inside of me. From feet to my smile. Then we all sat underneath the globe in a circle, people from all over the world, around a lotus-shaped structure. It was almost flat, but with pure white lotus petals. Where a crystal sphere sits. Water flows slowly over the petals down to the center, but so slowly that you can observe every ripple, like birds of water diving into paradise. Then exiting the Matrimandir, I awoke to the world. I walked out into nature, bringing with me in my heart and hands all that my spirit had felt—perfect cleansing. I sat beneath the banyan tree, leaning against a trunk for support, seeing no end to peace.<sup>27</sup>

This so-called “abode of the Mother,” who along with Sri Aurobindo was and is the stated reason the city exists and persists, provided a strong symbolic spatial conclusion to a week in which the technical details of “sustainable habitats” were conveyed as only as powerful as the consciousness one brought to them. It solidified

the connection between good design and a form of consciousness, even if the precise contours of that consciousness remained amorphous.

I do not wish to imply here that students received the good design-consciousness connection somehow automatically; on the contrary, each student made her own sense of the week's course content and the individual and collective experience of Auroville. Another student reflection conveys a sense of the questions left open and unanswered as the week came to a close:

Overall the experience of Auroville has taught me many things. It showed the importance of simple living, caring for the society. It also brought about certain questions. Can we consider it as an ideal for sustainable society? Can it be replicated elsewhere and accepted by people? Or should its existence remain as something different from the mainstream society?<sup>28</sup>

While Auroville was in some ways a "city," its population and density suggested little that could be scaled to, and produced in, a city of the scale and density of Mumbai. Many of the innovative techniques we studied in such detail, like decentralized water management systems or mud brick manufacturing, seemed to have little immediate relevance to Mumbai and its challenges. The practice of environmental architecture, then—the ecology in practice dimension of their training—was not what was primarily derived from this study tour. Instead, the idea that good design depended in an essential way on both techniques *and* consciousness was the take-away; the remarkably inclusive notion of Indian-ness that Aurovillians assured us derived from this duality only made the idea of Indian environmental architecture make more, and more appealing, sense.

By the close of the visit, our group showed discernible signs of an emergent environmental affinity, one that traced the general sense that "consciousness" formed an important dimension of the good design we wished to understand, as did identifying that dimension as linked to an expansive and, at least in an implicit way, a rather politically ambivalent notion of Indian-ness. We could be effective environmental architects, and viscerally understand good design, it seemed, without having to "opt in" to the messy and often opaque political economic questions and structures that determined the course of so much urban development. The essential reflexivity when it came to good design, then, was environmental, ecological, and integrated; it was not political or economic, save as an item in a site visit analysis.

Tamara Sears reminds us that, "the self-conscious and intentional assimilation of forms, for the purpose of creating new social identities, has been an ongoing phenomenon in architectural history and practice. In this sense architects have the potential to make real interventions in society as the mediators between individuals, tradition, and government policy."<sup>29</sup> Yet here, in Auroville, we gleaned little that might guide us to be strategic mediators, effective practitioners of good design. The aspirational life of good design was unquestionably crystalized, which emboldened us, but the sociopolitical reflexivity we would need in order to bridge

that aspiration to effective ecology in practice was left, as a consequence of omission, to the domain of others. The journey, in any case, was lauded as an overwhelming success.

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At the RSIEA Opening Day Welcome Program in 2012, a short program item had featured a presentation by Lucky Kulkarni, a representative of Govardhan Ashram and Eco-Village. This would be the first study tour of the semester, and unlike Auroville, it was a new and experimental addition to the RSIEA curriculum. There was no doubt that it sounded perfect for our purposes: Kulkarni promised what seemed to be an ideal eco-village setting, distributing multiple colorful brochures that promised serenity, sustainability, and spiritual growth.

Her comments were animated by colorful images of bucolic landscapes and cozy lodges. Kulkarni told the audience that Govardhan is “a village planned with urbanites in mind—the place where urban dwellers can come to experience nature.” It was comfortable, she assured her audience, *and yet* natural. She continued by describing the lodging accommodation at Govardhan as “the way we (urban dwellers) want to stay, but with a rural touch.”

The eco-village was designed by the environmental architect Chitra Vishwanath, and buildings throughout the complex were designed for maximum, if not complete, environmental self-sufficiency. From generous use of locally available building materials (which included compressed earthen blocks that we later learned came from Auroville), to interlinked village-scale solar energy systems, bio-gas systems, organic food production, on-site sewage treatment, small scale cottage industries, and extensive cowsheds, Kulkarni narrated an idyllic setting in which to both learn and experience the fundamental elements of good design in environmental architecture.

Unlike the much longer journey to Auroville, the drive to Govardhan from RSIEA was just three hours long, allowing students and faculty to make smaller group travel arrangements. I joined faculty members who chose to drive to the ashram the night before our two-day workshop began; some students arrived early the following morning, and a final group joined us for one intensive final day.

Our small faculty group arrived as the first from RSIEA to reach Govardhan; two young monks greeted us at the village gate and showed us to the yoga shala. In almost total silence, and with virtually no introductions, we were served a light vegetarian dinner and shown to a lodging center where our guest rooms were pre-assigned. Aesthetically, the building nearly blended with the landscape; functionally, it used a solar water heater and drew energy from sources across the property. In the rooms, a collection of Ayurvedic toiletry items produced in the village supplied us with our basic needs. What was completed seemed integrated and potentially quite interesting, but we also noticed right away that a surprising portion of the eco-village complex was still under construction.



As we retired to our rooms, we joked about the very early morning start time, and the first item on the agenda: “morning prayers and short class on mantra meditation.” For a group more accustomed to a concept of “consciousness” that did not map to a specific set of prayers or even a specified religious tradition, this struck us as an unusual—if perhaps unsurprising—way to start a weekend course on environmental architecture. Agreeing we would keep an open mind, we woke according to the schedule and assembled again, some bleary-eyed, at the yoga shala.

An adult monk arrived, accompanied by a young boy. The monk explained that he would lead us in a brief “class,” which ran for about ten minutes and consisted of a discussion of how to assume a “prayerful mindset” for the day. He then led us through a short series of yoga poses, basic stretches, and continued meditation. Our faculty group giggled as we awkwardly sought to balance the glaring contrast between our flexible, fit, and soft-spoken monk leader, and our own physical limitations. I felt among us an almost tense desire to be respectful, if not reverent, but an impulse to make jokes that would break that same tension seemed to leave the monk unimpressed.

Following the yoga session, another monk led us to a large lecture hall. The structure was built of compressed earth blocks, and an outdoor corridor wrapped around its full length, providing shade and enabling a sense of constant contact with the outside. Once inside the lecture hall, however, the atmosphere was dim and poorly lit. We took our seats.

The next two hours saw the lighter emotions of the early morning turn to a clearer frustration. For the full session, a speaker delivered a lecture that seemed completely disconnected from the theme of the visit. Entitled, “Overcoming Anger,” the content focused on techniques of anger control and the ways to practice “the art of happiness.” The claims made throughout the lecture were vague, and left unattached in any explicit way to a specific philosophy.

We were all aware that Govardhan is an ISKON undertaking, so in some ways we all expected some amount of orientation to its philosophy, especially insofar as it was related to the story of the site itself. Yet we sat in a lecture hall, left to gaze outward toward the environment and the larger grounds, feeling as if we might be experiencing some kind of nonspecific recruitment.

During a short tea break and a moment outside, we shared brief conversations and affirmed our puzzlement. Yet we’d only begun the weekend program, not to mention the day, so we returned to the classroom with the shared hope that the topics would soon shift to environmental architecture, or at least consciousness as it related to good design.

The next lecture was called “Stress Management,” and as it went on the faculty grew, somewhat ironically, restless and impatient. I wrote in my notebook that we all seemed increasingly stressed out; we had yet to discuss anything overtly related to environmental architecture. Like the others, I felt distracted by a keen desire to

go outside and explore the grounds. When the lunch break finally arrived, collective relief followed us quickly out of the hall and into the larger village.

In the afternoon we made our first guided visit to the larger eco-village, beginning, unsurprisingly, at the extensive cowshed. The head of the cowshed greeted us to explain that the core mission of Govardhan, and a pivotal aspect of its spiritual and ecological philosophy, is cow “protection.” The cowshed structure was therefore a kind of dual center: it served both spiritual and sustainability goals. He continued to explain that, with the right number of cows to balance the human population in the ashram, human needs for food and energy could be met sustainably. While Govardhan had not yet achieved full self-sufficiency, our host told us that its ultimate objective was to provide for all of the village’s needs, and to process all of its wastes. In this way, ultimately, the village sought to operate with a fully closed nutrient loop.

By this point in the day our full group was assembled, and we represented a wide range of faith traditions and identities. Among us were Muslims, Jains, Christians, and Parsis, as well as Hindus whose identification with Hinduism spanned a broad continuum. We were well aware of the profound symbolism of the cow in Hindu tradition, but also acutely mindful that an exclusive and often violent mobilization of orthodox ideas of cow protection was active, to tragic effect, in many parts of India.

Although we had not yet heard any direct references to ISKON in the morning seminars, touring the cowshed and walking through the eco-village reinforced the ideology of the devotees we were among. The same could be said of Auroville, to be sure, insofar as its members are also devotees of a specific spiritual philosophy and members of an ashram. Yet the dual fact that our program had, to that point, featured very little explicitly environmental content, and that the aesthetics and practices of the ashram created such a clear distinction between us as visitors and our hosts, the monks, gave this study tour a discernably different valence. Those present in Auroville tended to dress differently from one another, for instance, creating a general feeling of relative cosmopolitanism. By contrast, the Govardhan residents with whom we interacted were all men, and nearly all were monks dressed in white, saffron, or red robes. Even this simple uniformity marked us as unmistakable outsiders.

When I asked an RSIEA faculty member what she thought of the site at that point, her reply came slowly, as though she was seeking a way to be both respectful and appropriately critical. She offered that the most important thing to her was that students coming to Govardhan would be exposed to an alternative model of living, one that formed a social basis for ecologically sound commitments. “Even if the efforts are not perfect,” she said, “the experience of being in a place that is organized so differently is extremely valuable. Most of the students have never been to a place like this,” she said, and the exposure to it would attune them to

what is possible in the world. Although it went unsaid between us, there was an overt feeling of orthodoxy and extremity in Govardhan that, for a variety of complex reasons, we had avoided confronting in Auroville. Here, the premise of an expansive and inclusive “Indian” identity, which linked to the consciousness-good design duality, seemed far less tenable. At the same time, faculty members repeatedly expressed to me their confidence in the students’ capacity to engage the experience critically and selectively. In other words, faculty members felt that there was still a crucial, politically neutral message about sustainability embedded in the experience of Govardhan, and it was that environmental consciousness that made this study tour valuable.

Later, the same faculty member confided that she was not impressed with some of the underlying spiritual messages that came through as the workshop went on. “At ISKON, they start with shared values,” she said, “and so in some ways meeting the challenge of running an eco-village is easier.” Furthermore, the affinities between members of the ashram were not fundamentally anchored to environmental values, *per se*, in contrast, perhaps, with the experience at Auroville.

The second day involved extensive tours of the grounds and built structures. A session at the main assembly hall highlighted its interconnected environmental features: constructed of compressed earth blocks, illuminated largely by natural day lighting, cooled by low-energy cooling technologies and powered by solar, this was a building that seemed to fulfill a long list of desirable environmental attributes. We learned here that vermicomposting, on-site wastewater treatment, and the use of biogas all figured in the environmental supply-waste chains throughout the eco-village.

On the mid-morning tour across the village grounds, our monk guide began to connect Govardhan’s built form to a narrative of “Indian” history and identity. “You see,” he said, “the traditional lifestyle was logical and eco-friendly. We want to show people that this lifestyle was not for a lack of knowledge; instead, they had great knowledge that was lost when we became an industrial society.” He stopped walking, and addressed himself to the full group:

Stress is the number one killer of people today. Why? Because we live in a greed culture. We have lost connection with Mother Earth. Since the Industrial Revolution she has become a wife to be exploited. Everything we needed to know we knew in ancient times, before industrial society broke our relationship to the earth. For us, the earth is Bhumi Devi. Our goal is a harmonious life.

In some ways, this logic resonated with a similar set of points we’d encountered in Auroville, yet again, in this guise the group was both interested and uneasy. Though the logic of recovering values and technologies humanity had known through deep history was consistent, the inclusive potential to claim that history as one’s heritage did not. Here, “Indian-ness” was a much more difficult category to disentangle from a reflexive awareness of the sociopolitical life of this same logic.

The group shuffled onward for another visit to the cowshed, and the monk stopped before entering to deliver an extended talk about the “basis of the Vedic lifestyle.” “In traditional society, he began, people depended on two elements: cow and land.” Cows and land formed a “perfect circle” for fulfilling the needs of human life. The manure was a source of fuel, and a rich form of soil nutrition—that is, a natural fertilizer. Unlike other forms of excrement, which the Vedas deplore as polluting, cow manure, he told us, is revered and “auspicious;” it is a soil nutrient that long predates chemical fertilizers. It is also the foundation of biogas, which powers much of the ashram, and an ancient disinfectant. He continued to describe the use of dung for plastering floors and walls, and its extensive use, along with cow urine, as an antibacterial agent in Auyurvedic medicine. And of course, he said as if in an afterthought, cows provide milk.

In a switch from historical tradition to contemporary technology, our guide encouraged us to “see for ourselves,” not only here but by consulting Govardhan’s extensive website. Much later, curious to follow his advice, I found the ashram’s extensive archive of articles, essays, and other materials. Among titles such as, “Land and Cow: the Green Miracle,” and “Land and Cow: a Perfect Sustainable System,” I read:

ONE ONLY NEEDS TO TURN THE CLOCK BACK BY FEW DECADES AND GLANCE OVER INTO THE LIFESTYLE OF TRADITIONAL INDIA.

Life in traditional India was purely centered around the culture of fulfilling one’s needs and not one’s unlimited wants. And two things played a vital role in setting up such a sustainable lifestyle—Land and Cow. Unlike the modern Industrial systems, Land and Cow form a perfectly sustainable system that can fulfill the needs of the human society. The output of a Cow barn is manure, which is a first class organic fertilizer and acts as an input for the agricultural land. And the output of the agricultural land, the grasses and fodder, act as an excellent Cow feed, thus supporting the Cow barn. Thus we see that these two systems are self-sufficient sustainable systems that can go on if properly taken care of. And the byproducts of these two systems namely milk and other dairy products, electricity through biogas, various cosmetic and medical products from Cow dung and urine, vegetables, fruits and grains are essential for mankind’s survival.<sup>30</sup>

Once again, we entered Govardhan’s well ordered, kept, and pleasant cowshed, and for over an hour, students and faculty wandered, almost adoringly, through the structure. Many posed for pictures with the cows, and the entire group seemed to linger to enjoy being among these impressive, and undeniably beautiful, animals. Our urban origins compelled some slightly awkward, and sometimes sentimentally charmed, giggles as students and faculty moved from shed to shed. Some gestured as if to lovingly pet the cows; others recited all of their “cute” attributes. Among the animals, the sociopolitical sting that accompanied the phrase, “cow protection” nearly vanished.

The everyday reality of tending, grooming, feeding, cleaning, and caring for the cows was not the visit’s emphasis; the shed was instead a spectacle meant to

animate the romantic story of cow-human harmony, and to provide an opportunity to revere and show gratitude to the creatures. Our monk's comments framed the animals as actual repositories, if not guardians, of an aspect of the ancient wisdom of good design.

We continued to the ashram kitchen, where monks offered explanations of the village biogas system and a chance to hand-churn milk. The program concluded at the site's extensive waste-treatment and plant nursery complex, called the Soil Biotechnology Plant. Here, yet another monk offered a slightly modified description of the perfection of "traditional" Vedic lifeways, hinting at their social complexities and exclusions: since in the past, human waste was collected by a particular social group (which he did not name), he told us, and since this work degraded and marginalized that group, the Govardhan community recognized the need to manage the human waste at the ashram and eco-village in a different way. The monk explained that relying on water as a basis for waste transport and decomposition systems was inefficient at this site, so the Govardhan model relies on soil microbes as the principle decomposition agent. The ashram's waste treatment system and its extensive plant nursery are in this way interlinked, and comprise a large complex that, like a composting toilet, creates plant fertilizers from human waste inputs.<sup>31</sup>

The comment at the Soil Biotechnology Plant offered the group a passing, but nevertheless overt, acknowledgment that the social systems that accompanied the version of Vedic lifeways we encountered at Govardhan had not been perfect across the long sweep from ancient history to the present. Yet the experience of the site remained qualitatively different, and in the end was considered far less "effective" than the study tour to Auroville for imparting RSIEA's pedagogical vision of good design. After the trip ended, faculty assured me that it was unlikely that future environmental architecture student groups would return.

Govardhan offered both contrast and consistency, then, to Auroville. Constant, clear referencing of Vedic "wisdom" and "tradition" made it impossible to fully separate the contemporary symbolics of Indian national and Maharashtra state politics from our experience of this place, and therefore almost impossible to glean an appropriately expansive and accessible notion of Indian-ness that could strengthen good design. It was far more difficult to encounter Govardhan as a place where the environmental objectives and values that its residents espoused could be regarded as somehow secular or secularizing, to say nothing of universal. The core message—to seek in precolonial history the remedies of all postcolonial modern problems—fell flat and unconvincing at Govardhan, even if that same logic had enjoyed traction at other moments in RSIEA training, and in other settings. Perhaps here, it was impossible to simply foreground environmental reflexivity, suspend sociopolitical reflexivity, and proceed to build a sociality with its basis in a shared idea of good design.



FIGURE 11. Students and faculty on the field study tour of Govardhan Eco-village listening to their guide describe the sustainability features of one of the site's main buildings. *Photo by the author.*

Ever since the classic work of scholars such as Wolfe (1982), Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983), Anderson (1983), and others, political ecologists have taken interest in the ways that ideas and practices conventionally accepted as “traditional” and “historical” are invented, and reinvented, for the time and context within which they are mobilized. Each historical element invoked and retold is aggregated for the present, fused to power relations and specific sociopolitical objectives that may reinforce, or may aim to contest, dominant patterns of power and authority. In

matters related to environmental change, we often invoke scientific knowledge and environmental “awareness” to inform a list of *choices* for action, but it is through dominant and contested historical narratives that social actors assign meaning and stakes to the environmental actions they undertake. Nature is not only made, then, but also made meaningful, in part through these everyday retellings of the histories and identity attributes that matter.

Any version of a historical basis for a concept of Indian-ness that accompanies a concept of good design carries with it an implicit politics, made known through what is explicitly identified and narrated, but made equally important by what is left unsaid, who is excluded, and which issues are simply ignored. In the particular case of architectural form and nationalist narrative in India, this is well demonstrated, and has been convincingly argued, across a range of colonial and postcolonial cases.<sup>32</sup>

RSIEA’s environmental architectural agenda, particularly when it came to building an environmental affinity group, required a historical basis for sustainability, a social capacity for broad-reaching inclusion, and a set of meanings that gave environmental architecture its urgency and purpose. The wide range of backgrounds and identities students brought with them prior to the program needed a singular, coherent ideology of belonging, not only to forge a strong collective, but to inspire that collective to move from theoretical commitment to actual praxis. RSIEA’s narrative of Indian good design and its history could not afford to marginalize its practitioners, and thus required a nominally inclusive history to which all students could stake legitimate claim. The necessary silences, however, sat uncomfortably with a sense of complicity, precisely with the politics of exclusion and marginality.

Here, we might observe a contrast between the experience in Auroville and that shared in Govardhan. In Auroville, it was possible to embrace environmental reflexivity without having to undertake, at least in any explicit detail, an attendant sociopolitical critique. Here, the fallacy that a politically neutral and removed “environmental” stance was possible underpinned a sense of Indian-ness that could be accessed by every environmental architect, regardless of her background. Yet, as noted above, that same fallacy was undone in the disquiet of Govardhan. Its socio-politics were too overtly exclusive to enable the neutralizing environmental imaginary; the eco-political disconnect was never dismantled, only in brief moments suspended.

Neither study tour reached a more theoretically satisfying level of engagement with questions of history, identity, Indian-ness, or good design. That level would depend, as Sears has argued, on recognizing that “change and hybridity are ongoing processes, and that we should embrace the multi-layered nature of . . . tradition rather than sifting through it to find the truly pure.”<sup>33</sup>

For Sears, one way to mitigate the silent exclusions characteristic of the study tours would be to simply seek and name the elements of hybridity and process. She writes that by embracing a multi-layered past:

scholars and architectural practitioners can provide strong resistance to the imposition of nationalist narratives onto material culture, which, in modern India, often privilege the earliest moments—the Vedic or the Mauryan—over later periods. . . . (By) recognizing that both Vedic India and Sultanese Janupur are part of the history of contemporary India, we acknowledge that identity is composed of multiple layers built up through human experience.<sup>34</sup>

Lest we leave this matter with the impression that the capacity, and indeed responsibility, to draw knowledge from notions of Indian history or Indian-ness is somehow unique to environmental architecture, or to the environmental anxieties of the present, I conclude with just one illustration of the ways the issues explored in this chapter are continuous with, rather than a break from, the past.

In the fall of 1987, the international publication *Architectural Review* published a special issue on Indian architecture.<sup>35</sup> Its contributors attempted to survey Indian architecture in terms of more “established,” Western architectural thought that predominated at that time. The introduction reads:

Throughout the world, architects are attempting to evolve a contemporary architecture that shows the respect for history and tradition that was abandoned during the pioneering frenzy of the Modern Movement and yet is capable of fulfilling the demands of late-twentieth century society and reflecting its aspirations. The search has, in the west, produced much grotesque and self-conscious architecture in which historic references are used superficially and ironically. But in India, where there is continuity between past and present, there is the promise of a more sophisticated and authentic synthesis between old and new and indications that a genuine architectural future may be found by reference to the past.<sup>36</sup>

Thus the conventional international gaze has long attributed “continuity between past and present” to India, and often ascribed to it an apolitical and deeply problematic orientalist posture. Yet one cannot ignore the resonance between the RSIEA Opening Day assurances that, “It is Western nations that should be looking to *us* to learn about sustainability; it is only India that can teach them inner growth.”

The same volume of *Architectural Review*, includes an essay by William JR Curtis, who calls Charles Correa, prevalent on the international stage at that time, “pivotal” not only to “Indian Modern architecture,” but also, potentially, the practitioner of an alternative form of praxis, one with the capacity to “synthesize old and new” and in doing so “address what is pressing in the present.” He writes:

The best recent architecture in India may contain relevant hints for the developing countries. It is becoming increasingly obvious that the uncritical adaptation of Western models is no real solution, as these are often inadequate to climate and culture: the results tend to be alien and alienating. But the answer does not lie in the superficial imitation of local traditions either, as it fails to update what is substantial about the past, and does not address what is pressing in the present. The hope is to make a relevant synthesis of old and new, regional and universal. The best recent





FIGURE 12. RSIEA students exploring new construction in one of BCIL's housing developments outside of Bangalore. *Photo by the author.*

Indian work is so challenging because it is open to the tests of the future as well as the grandeur of the past<sup>37</sup>

Curtis would go on to write a monograph about BV Doshi, in which he took great interest in Doshi's work for its "... search for an architecture of authenticity based on a philosophy of life."<sup>38</sup> This phrase captures, perhaps, one dimension of the study tours as they charted an Indian basis for environmental architecture in the present.

With the work of defining good design infused with experiential and classroom-derived concepts, techniques, and modes of consciousness students would need, and with a strong environmental affinity group made ever stronger as the two-year program progressed, it became ever clearer that one critical element of the ecology in practice puzzle was missing. The sociopolitical reflexivity that would allow environmental architecture students to operationalize the design approach that most by now so strongly embraced was not, and would not be, part of the experience of training. The chasm between aspiration and practice, then, remained potentially vast and unbridgeable.