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Architectural Authorship as Process: The Work of Mona Pinto, Golconde’s Building Manager

Lili Boenigk

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ABSTRACT

Golconde is often described as India’s first Modernist building. Completed in 1945 in Pondicherry, a French-governed enclave in southern India, the building serves as a dormitory for members of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. This article explores the role of Golconde’s longtime building manager, Mona Pinto, who is largely responsible for the structure’s remarkable preservation. Mona’s contributions to Golconde’s creation and maintenance challenge conventional, temporally static understandings of the building object. Pinto’s positionality also allowed her to mediate philosophical and secular understandings of space at the ashram. Though actors like Pinto enable the physical and social functionality of structures through practices of care, architectural authorship is traditionally awarded solely to the singular “designer.” By leveraging conceptions of architecture as process and frameworks of emotional labor, this article aims to valorize acts of architectural creation performed by actors like Pinto after the completion of the building object.



Lili Boenigk is a graduate student in the department of Building Technology at MIT. Her research explores the way in which social networks intertwine with material culture to facilitate material reuse and build collective material imaginaries. She is also interested in how care labor and maintenance regimes inform changes in the built environment.

lboenigk@mit.edu



Figure 1: Golconde Dormitory in Pondicherry
(Photo Courtesy: Smita Dalvi)

Introduction

Golconde is often described as India's first Modernist building. Completed in 1945 in Pondicherry, a French-governed enclave in southern India, the building serves as a dormitory for members of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram (**Figure 1**). With its rough concrete exterior, clean lines, and sparse interiors, the design anticipates "high modernism" in India two decades before Le Corbusier's canonical complex in Chandigarh (Dalvi, 2016). Though historians argue that the building "offers a living testament to the original modernist credo—architecture as the manifest union of technology, aesthetics, and social reform," Golconde also compels a revision of Modernist narratives concerning process and authorship (Vir Gupta et al., 2021).

Mona Pinto acted as Golconde's building manager for 56 years. Unlike those seeking spiritual fulfillment at the ashram, she is quoted to have said, "I just came to Pondicherry to marry an Indian!" (Nunally, 2018). Mona's marriage to her husband Udar crossed racial, national, and religious divides, challenging relations with their respective families and channeling the isolated couple towards Aurobindo's emerging community. The couple became intertwined in the construction of Golconde as a physical building and a political organization in Pondicherry and abroad. Mona in particular liaised between the spiritual and secular branches of the ashram. An ashramite wrote, "Golconde is a building of international interest and Mona was the most integral and defining part of it. It would never have become, nor remained what it is, if it was not for Mona and the perfectionist care that she gave to it. In fact Mona was Golconde and Golconde was and still is (for me and many others) Mona" ("Golconde Maintenance," n.d.). Mona's secular attention to the building resonated with and materialized ashram philosophy, though she herself kept distance from language of personal spiritual growth.

Mona's role questions a conception of architecture that ends with a static building object. Tim Ingold writes, the "'final form' is but a fleeting moment in the life of any feature... for



Figure 2: Mona and Udar's marriage in Pondicherry in 1937 (photo courtesy Gauri Pinto and Tara Jauhar)

it is in the very process of dwelling that we build” (Ingold, 2000). By performing the daily maintenance and organization of Golconde, Mona executed the political and cultural mandates of the ashram and enabled its remarkable preservation. Yet, actors like Mona are often obscured: the labor involved in care, largely performed by women or people of color, is overshadowed by the architects who bring the building into being. To echo Menna Agha, “I wonder what the recognition of the emotional as a method of spatial production would mean for contemporary perception of the profession of the architect” (Agha, 2020). Like Agha, I turn to an informal archive for information on Mona, who doesn't feature actively in most official documents about the building. Leaning on Agha's conceptual framework as well as frameworks of architecture as process, this piece explores Mona Pinto's role as a space maker that enabled the construction, maintenance, and preservation of a Modernist architectural treasure.

Early Life of Mona Pinto

Ethel “Mona” Lovegrove met Laurence “Udar” Pinto over the phone. In 1931, Mona was 20 years old and working as a secretary for the London Gas and Light Company, where her coworkers had nicknamed her Mona for always “moaning” about the draft (Nunally, 2018). She had been tasked with cold-calling university students to sell tickets for a company benefit concert. When Laurence, a 25-year-old engineering student at London University, picked up the phone, he liked the sound of her voice so much that he convinced her to sell him the ticket in person.

They met under the Charing Cross Station clock, wearing red roses for identification. The subsequent relationship scandalized both Mona's working-class Anglican and Udar's upper-class Goan Catholic families. It was only after Mona's father's death and her conversion to Catholicism that she traveled to India to marry Udar (**figure 2**). Nevertheless, their wedding in Pondicherry in 1937 was attended only by Udar's brother.



*Figure 3: Golconde's regularly subdivided facade with movable louvers
(Photo Courtesy: Smita Dalvi)*

This isolation from familial support networks likely nudged the couple towards Sri Aurobindo's emerging spiritual community in Pondicherry. Sri Aurobindo had been active in the Indian nationalist movement and was imprisoned for sedition in 1908. While in prison, he developed his philosophy of "Karmayoga" or the pursuit of divine life on earth. He arrived in Pondicherry in 1910 seeking refuge from persecution (Mueller and Vir Gupta, 2021). His philosophy and writing attracted many followers, including a French occultist of Egyptian-Turkish parentage named Mira Alfassa. Alfassa became Aurobindo's spiritual partner, founding an ashram dedicated to his teachings. She was known by devotees ("sadhaks") as "The Mother" and orchestrated the day-to-day functioning of the growing spiritual community. Mona and Udar increasingly found themselves at dinner parties with followers of Aurobindo and The Mother, beginning a trajectory that would reshape both their lives and the structure of the spiritual community itself.

Golconde, Pondicherry

By 1935, Sri Aurobindo and The Mother had attracted more than 150 followers, and the group "became an ashram for want of a better word" (Sanyal, 2022). The Mother decided to use a sizable donation from the Chief Minister of Hyderabad to construct a dormitory for visiting devotees. The name "Golconde" was given in honor of the Golconda fort in the benefactor's native Hyderabad. A friend connected her with Czech-American architect Antonin Raymond, who she hired to design the building. Raymond had a successful career in Japan (getting his start with Frank Lloyd Wright and the Tokyo Imperial Hotel), but with the advent of WWII, he welcomed the invitation to come to Pondicherry.

Through his design, Raymond aimed to deliver a tranquil and reflective environment while mediating Pondicherry's hot and humid climate through passive means. His unprecedented reinforced concrete frame was an intentional contrast to stylized French colonial architecture typical in the area. Golconde's design elegantly leverages modernist aesthetics to create a meditative atmosphere for spiritual seekers (**figure 3**). Dormitory cells are



Figure 4: George Nakashima

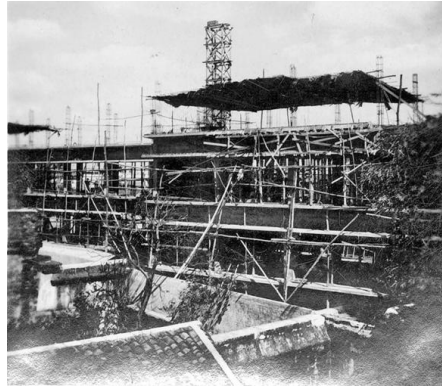


Figure 5: Golconde under construction

(Photos courtesy of Gauri Pinto and Tara Jauhar)

sparse and minimalist, featuring built-in teak furniture and smooth concrete as well as plastered surfaces. The repetitive matrix of rooms is echoed by the linear subdivision of the facade by movable louvers on the north and south sides, enabling the structure to take advantage of breezes and mitigate solar heat gain. The entire cross section works as a ventilating and shading device to keep it cool in Pondicherry's sultry heat without mechanical devices. Raymond's design could be considered a textbook approach to climatic design, before such books were written (Dalvi, 2016).

The supervision of Golconde's construction fell to George Nakashima, a young Japanese-American architect in Raymond's office. Aside from executing intricate, elegant construction details, Nakashima coordinated construction process is radically different from the one Raymond initially imagined. With typical hired construction labor, Golconde would have been completed within two years. However, Aurobindo rejected the idea that external construction workers would enter the ashram, disturbing the atmosphere. Instead, sadhaks would construct the building themselves. Raymond later wrote that the "client" was not interested in "efficiency," "exactitude of estimates," or a "working schedule." Instead, Aurobindo wished that "the process of building should be a means of learning and experience... through which spiritual and all other aspects [of human nature] must be developed" (Sanyal, 2022). Nakashima spent three years in Pondicherry, eventually becoming a sadhak himself and adopting the Sanskrit name Sundarananda ("one who delights in beauty") (**Figure 4**). In the end, Golconde took ten years to complete.

Innumerable hurdles plagued the construction process. Materials imported into French colonial India could bypass British customs, enabling the purchase of high-grade Japanese cement and structural steel from France (Sanyal, 2022). However, transporting steel reinforcement from ships offshore proved challenging—Nakashima recalls that "by the time they were unloaded, the steel rods had been bent so that they looked like a mass of spaghetti" and needed to be hammered straight (**Figure 5**).



Figure 6: Entrance hall with umbrella stand designed by Udar (Photo courtesy: Florian Oberhuber)

From the outset, Golconde's construction was not only improbable, but blurred the lines between building as an object and building as a process. Aurobindo's insistence on the connection between sadhak spiritual development and construction work bakes labor and continuity into the fabric of the building itself. Saptarshi Sanyal frames this through the concept of "self-building" in which "the self-build architectural project of Golconde was, equally, the self-building of those who participated in its making" (Sanyal, 2022). This challenges the linear trajectory of architectural creation that is so prevalent in Modernist narratives, with the canonical male architect executing a system atop a tabula rasa. Instead of the delivery of an object, the building was to be a part of a longer, human spiritual trajectory experienced by community members like Nakashima. *Golconde transcends a building object*, functioning as a vehicle for spiritual development and merging social and physical forms of construction.

Golconde is often studied within the canon of Tropical Modernism, however, understanding the structure as a process challenges this framing. Vir Gupta, Mueller, and Samii describe it as a "wholly triumphant tropical Modernism" and "a living testament to the original modernist credo— architecture as the manifest union of technology, aesthetics, and social reform" (Vir Gupta et al., 2021). Golconde also features prominently in Aladar and Victor Olgyay's seminal 1950s survey of passive thermal comfort technologies; **Figure 6** shows the sunken, shaded entrance hall designed to trap cool breezes (Olgyay, 1978). Implicit here is the delivery of a social and technological "solution" through Raymond's architectural design.¹ Though Raymond delivered a design concept inspired by ashram philosophy, his intentions were mediated during the construction process through sadhak participation and "self-building." I argue that Golconde is therefore not the delivery of a solution or an expression of the "modernist credo," rather, that it represents the ongoing process of a constellation of actors mediating modernity.



Figure 7: Left to right, Udar, Margaret, Gauri, Ambu, and Mona



Figure 8: Udar spray painting in Harpagon workshop

(Photos courtesy of Gauri Pinto and Tara Jauhar)

The Pintos and Golconde

This mediation of building form through ashram philosophy did not end with the completion of Golconde in 1948. Much like the construction process, operation and maintenance of the building was understood as the spiritual work of its inhabitants. As a result, Golconde remains one of the most impeccably preserved examples of early modernist architecture in India. Moreover, maintenance and operation work performed at Golconde also challenges our understanding of architecture as the delivery of a static building object.

Sanyal's scholarship shifts the use of the word "building" from a noun to a verb, enabling the understanding of Golconde as a process beyond the physical object (Sanyal, 2022). Here, she echoes Ingold's assertion that "to build is in itself already to dwell... Only if we are capable of dwelling, only then can we build" (Ingold, 2000). However, this "building" process did not end with the placement of the last interior finishing. Through dwelling, sadhaks continued to shape Golconde over the course of subsequent decades. Sanyal poses the question: "How did sadhaks who occupied its built spaces after the project was completed experience them? How was the structure's impeccable materiality maintained over time? These are also vital questions on its architecture's lived experiences, and hence, legitimate perspectives to narrate its history with."

Here is where Mona Pinto's story intersects with that of Golconde— and how her lived experience may narrate an alternative history of Modernism.

In 1937, At the recommendation of friends, the newly married Udar and Mona had a Darshan (spiritual meeting) with Sri Aurobindo. Udar subsequently wrote that he "had seen majesty at last!" (Pinto, 2007). He soon joined the ashram as an inmate, donated all his money to the collective, and changed his name from Laurence to Udar at Aurobindo's recommendation. Mona soon followed, bringing their newborn daughter Gauri, though it is unclear whether she became a sadhak herself. **Figure 7** shows the couple, their daughter

Gauri, their friend Ambu Kiran, and Margaret Woodrow Wilson (daughter of the former US President and a longtime resident of Golconde).

Udar became deeply involved in the construction of Golconde, working closely with Nakashima and drawing on his background in engineering. His most significant contribution was the creation of the Harpagon workshop, where almost all of Golconde's custom teak furniture and metal fittings were fabricated (**Figure 8**). The Mother had instructed that no detail of the architectural drawings should be changed, however, Pondicherry lacked the manufacturing facilities to produce Raymond's custom designed fittings. In Harpagon, brass vessels were melted down by sadhaks and used to create thousands of brass bolts, nuts, and taps which anchored everything from doorknobs to the mechanisms for the cement brise soleil.

Unlike Udar, who devoted himself explicitly to the pursuit of Karmayoga, Mona's relationship to the ashram's spiritual philosophy is less clear. Mona once warned an interviewer not to ask her any questions about yoga or sadhana, saying, "I do not practice sadhana, I just came to Pondicherry to marry an Indian!" Yet, she too became increasingly involved with the ashram. Her first contribution was to coordinate a group of women stitching the dormitory's linen bed coverings. For each covering, threads were painstakingly pulled from cotton cloth to produce patterns designed by one of the ashram's resident artists ("Golconde Maintenance," n.d.). Though Mona may not have seen this as spiritual work, her contribution enabled the realization of a holistic architectural vision for Golconde, bringing the project in line with Karmayoga principles.

Golconde was initially meant to house only the most committed disciples. However, with the advent of WWII, the building effectively became a guest house for many fleeing conflict ("Golconde Maintenance," n.d.). The Mother consequently needed someone to manage the dormitory's facilities. A friend of Mona's mentioned how well-maintained the Pinto home was, leading The Mother to invite Mona for an interview (Nunally, 2018). The meeting upset both women's preconceptions. Mona had expected a nun-like, mother superior-type figure, and instead found The Mother elegantly dressed and wearing light makeup. On the other side, The Mother commented later, "Are all Englishwomen as pretty as Mona Pinto?" Impressed by Mona's quiet competence, The Mother immediately appointed her as building manager. Mona fulfilled this role from 1948 until her death in 2004.

Mona's perfectionist care is the main reason for Golconde's remarkable physical preservation. In addition to training and coordinating a team of paid employees, she performed many of the maintenance tasks herself, from changing linens to cleaning bathrooms to polishing furniture ("Golconde Maintenance," n.d.). Mona was reportedly bounding up and down ashram stairs with indefatigable energy into her late eighties. Even delicate elements like teak woodwork and moveable concrete louvers remained functional decades later under her watchful eye. George Nakashima was amazed and "delighted" to find the building in such pristine condition after a visit in the 1980s. His daughter Mira writes, "rubbed seashell plaster walls and meticulously formed raw concrete [were] still sound because of the fine workmanship of its original construction and the reverent,

diligent maintenance that Mona Pinto provided it from the time it was built" ("Golconde Maintenance," n.d.).

The high volume of visitors flowing through the ashram also led Mona to develop a list of rules ensuring the protection of furniture and facilities. This was sometimes unpopular: when a visiting doctor disobeyed the rules and scratched a table with his shaving implements, Mona chastised him. He complained to Sri Aurobindo, who defended Mona, writing,

"As regards Golconde and its rules... there is a reason for them and they are not imposed for nothing. In Golconde Mother has worked out her own idea through Raymond, Sammer and others. First, Mother believes in beauty as a part of spirituality and divine living; secondly, she believes that physical things have the Divine Consciousness underlying them as much as living things; and thirdly that they have an individuality of their own and ought to be properly treated" ("Golconde Maintenance," n.d.)

Here, the rules Mona developed for the protection of Golconde as a building object are recast as expressions of ashram philosophy in two ways. The first frames the Golconde architectural object as an extension of The Mother's spiritual vision, and therefore broader ashram philosophy. The second connects care for physical objects with the practice of Karmayoga. Though Mona may have created these rules for entirely practical purposes, ashram philosophy is intrinsically overlaid with Golconde's physical space. Mona's work therefore mediates Golconde's physical and spiritual functions.

In addition to an expression of ashram philosophy, Mona's work can be seen as an execution of the Modernist philosophy implicit in Raymond's design. Modernism suggests that spatial design can engender new social and political structures. In Golconde's case, Raymond sought to shape new social and spiritual experiences for dormitory residents through architecture. However, this deterministic philosophy has been critiqued by scholars like Henri Lefebvre, who argues that it neglects the complex, lived negotiations of space and is instead complicit with larger forces of capitalist or state power (Lefebvre, 1992).

This critique is often supported with examples of the rapid decay of Modernist projects, in which rigidly planned spaces become misaligned with their social and economic context. Spaces are no longer used as intended, or there is no capacity for maintenance, leading to disrepair. Brise soleil especially require specific manual care. Charles Correa described the brise soleil at Le Corbusier's Chandigarh complex as "dust catching, pigeon infested contrivances, which gather heat all day, and then radiate it back into the building at night causing indescribable anguish to the occupants" (Mackenzie, 1993). The hand-case asbestos cement brise soleil at Golconde, on the other hand, are impeccably preserved and functional to this day (**Figure 9**). Despite the unique (and often onerous) maintenance needs prescribed by Raymond's plan, Golconde remains true to the Modernist architectural vision he prescribed.

The preservation of this vision is possible because Mona fulfilled the labor needs prescribed implicitly in the building's design. This speaks to Lefebvre's assertion that



Figure 9: Golconde's custom made louvers (Photo Courtesy: Smita Dalvi)

“space, which seems homogeneous, which appears as a whole in its objectivity, in its pure form, such as we determine it, is a social product” (Lefebvre, 1992). Raymond’s building object could only be sustained by specific social and economic structures. The enforcement of these social structures dovetail in fascinating ways with ashram culture as rules for engagement with the space were integrated within Karmayoga philosophy. The Mother’s directive that nothing about Raymond’s plan was to be changed explicitly links spiritual and Modernist philosophy, as well as the social systems necessary for their preservation. It was Mona’s labor that orchestrated these systems within Golconde as a building object.

If “to build... is to dwell,” Mona spent her life building Golconde. In managing the building’s everyday operations, Mona enabled herself and countless sadhaks to dwell in the structure Raymond designed. Golconde’s physical form unites ashram and modernist philosophy; by maintaining the physical building object, Mona preserved both. However, she also facilitated an ongoing process of building beyond Golconde as an object. Interconnections between ashram philosophy and physical space facilitated non-physical construction as sadhaks to pursue their own spiritual work. Responding to Sanyal’s provocation– “How did sadhaks who occupied its built spaces after the project was completed experience them”– Mona’s story shows that the project was never completed.

Within and Beyond Golconde’s Walls

Over time, the ashram became an increasingly political entity with influence far beyond Pondicherry– and the Pintos remained at its center. In 1970, The Mother founded Sri Aurobindo’s Action, a group dedicated to safeguarding India’s independence and “fostering prosperity” through the dissemination of Aurobindo’s teachings (Jhunjhunwala, 2008). Udar, along with two other core sadhaks, traveled throughout India and internationally as representatives. Udar’s introduction at a three-day inter-religious conference at Cornell University reveals the political connections the ashram increasingly sought to advertise: “Udar Pinto has been sent to America by the Indian government’s Council for Cultural



Figure 10: Mona and Udar with Golconde's maintenance team



Figure 11: Mona and The Mother hosting a Christmas celebration in 1960

(Photos courtesy of Gauri Pinto and Tara Jauhar)

Relations as part of the centenary celebration of Sri Aurobindo, the great Indian revolutionary, poet and sage... He established many of [the ashram's] industrial departments and other projects, and is now its secretary. He has a long-standing personal and political friendship with Indira Gandhi" (Pinto, 2007).

Mona's work as building manager enabled Golconde to fulfill these political and social mandates at home. On the local level, she created a bank account for female employees to save their earnings outside of their husbands' reach ("Golconde Maintenance," n.d.). As an employer and resource for women, this act located the building as part of a broader social infrastructure in Pondicherry (**Figure 10**). Her role as a hostess also facilitated political networking. For example, when the Russian Olympic gymnastics team came to visit the ashram in 1956, The Mother reportedly told Mona "My work in Russia depends on this dinner," and requested that chicken be served ("Golconde Maintenance," n.d.). Since the ashram did not have the facilities to prepare meat, Mona prepared the chicken in her own home and creatively transported it to the ashram tables—the meeting was reportedly a success. Within the newly independent India, it was also Mona's Englishness that allowed her to perform as an interlocutor between formerly colonial entities and ashram leaders. Mona reflected, "I was a proper Englishwoman who knew how to serve tea, how to set a proper table, when to use the right dishes, etc. Mother knew she could rely on me for all these things" (Nunally, 2018). Mona's management of Golconde's operations created a space for the ashram's political and social dimension.

Mona's relationship with The Mother reveals her work as a mediator between the spiritual and secular branches of the ashram. Unlike Udar and other sadhaks, who interacted with The Mother largely as spiritual supplicants, Mona's relationship was grounded in the realities of running a guesthouse, dormitory, and emerging political organization (**Figure 11**). She wrote, "I had a practical, down to earth relationship with the Mother. We spoke in an earthly way with one another about the work and often times just as one woman to another. She was the most gracious and beautiful lady I ever knew" (Nunally, 2018). The Mother, on her part, wrote to Mona in a letter, "Here is one more occasion to tell you

physically what I told you so often when we meet in the night. How much I appreciate the quality of your work and how much I rely on your faithful steadiness" (Banerjee, 2018). Both The Mother and Mona had one foot in Golconde's spiritual world and one in the building as a physical object. Mona was therefore able to execute the spiritual, social, and political mandates of the ashram within the architecture of Golconde.

Paradigms of Authorship, Creation, and Continuity

A sadhak named Vilas wrote, "Mona was Golconde and Golconde was and still is (for me and many others) Mona." If Golconde is a continuous process of "building," Mona was the thread woven through each stage of its existence. Golconde evolved physically (through decay and repair), socially (through evolution of the ashram community), and politically (through changing relationships to the outside world). Mona mediated each of these, whether through interventions in the physical building object or in its non-physical spatial function.

Who, then, is the building's architect?

Recognizing the space-making contributions of actors like Mona invokes a conversation about the nature of authorship. Scholars like Martha Woodmansee, Bruno Latour, Henri Lefebvre, and Menna Agha have engaged with individualism in architectural authorship. Woodmansee challenges the notion of the "author" as a natural or timeless concept, demonstrating that authorship is a cultural and legal construct shaped by economic and legal conditions, and specifically the emergence of copyright law (Woodmansee, 1984). She builds on Michel Foucault's observation that "it would be worth examining how the author came to be individualized in a culture like ours, what status he has been given, at what moment studies of authenticity and attribution began, in what kind of system of valorization the author was involved, at what point we began to recount the lives of authors rather than of heroes, and how this fundamental category of 'the-man-and-his-work criticism' began" (*Textual Strategies*, 1979). Woodmansee's provocation lays the groundwork for more expansive understandings of creation within community.

In the context of architecture, and Modernism in particular, the architect is often afforded complete authorship over a building product. Latour's Actor-Network Theory explicitly rejects the idea of the architect as a sole creator, focusing instead on the collaborative and interconnected nature of architectural production (Latour, 2007). This approach also stresses that buildings are never "finished" and that networks of actors continue to shape structures throughout their lifetime. This echoes Lefebvre's observation that ongoing, changing social arrangements determine the form of physical space. He writes, "In space, what came earlier continues to underpin what follows ... Pre-existing space underpins not only durable spatial arrangements, but also representational spaces and their attendant imagery and mythic narratives" (Lefebvre, 1992). The change of structures over time (both physical and narrative), and the social structures that enable this, negate the possibility of an individualized architect.

Sanyal frames Golconde's construction as the product of a network of diverse actors. However, her network does not encompass actors who influenced the building beyond the completion of the physical structure. It also does not recognize actors like Mona who worked within Golconde as a physical and non-physical space. Expanding our conception of architectural authorship necessitates a broader definition of architectural creation.

Menna Agha argues for the emotional as a method of spatial production. She presents stories from Nubian displacement villages in Egypt, in which women are afforded authorship over structures as a result of their emotional labor (Agha, 2020). Women are understood to be the creators of structures within the Nubian episteme; Agha's language of emotional labor allows for their authorship to be recognized within external frameworks of architectural creation. This challenges the gendered notion of the architect and brings forth "actively invisibilized" actors. Agha also asserts that recognizing emotional work becomes a question of justice as it "rewards the maker with social, cultural, and economic capital." This echoes Saskia Sassen's observation in *Globalization and Its Discontents* that women's labor (especially in informal or "hidden" service economies), often goes unrecognized or undervalued in mainstream economic frameworks (Sassen, 1999). Valorizing emotional labor as a form of architectural creation gives marginalized creators power through authorship.

In addition to acts of community care, Mona's care for the building object can be framed as acts of emotional labor. Agha describes the way in which the hand-plastering of walls by women is seen as more than purely structural creation. She writes, "it is affection and respect that they must pay to that wall, which is more than a solid object. This implies that even the processes of material manipulation in Nubian placemaking are guided by a set of emotional values and markers" (Agha, 2020). The emotional dimension of care for physical objects echoes Mona's maintenance of Golconde's furniture. It also echoes ashram philosophy's respect for the physical object, which has "Divine Consciousness" (Banerjee, 2018). Emotional labor captures the multidimensional way in which Mona sustained Golconde.

Agha's understanding of emotional placemaking in Nubia depends on sources outside of the traditional archive, referencing Donna Haraway's argument that all knowledge is situated and partial (Haraway, 1988). Similarly, Mona's labor is only recognized and celebrated in informal, anecdotal accounts on ashram websites. Agha observes that women are only recognized as authors in conversations and spaces that are not visible or legible to architectural scholarship outside of "Nubian/indigenous/African culture[s] of knowing" (Agha, 2020). Granting actors like Mona the power associated with authorship means valorizing anecdotal, informal sources outside formal architectural histories.

Conclusion



Figure 12: Mona at Golconde, in 2000. (Photo Courtesy: Smita Dalvi)

Mona worked for as long as her health permitted (**Figure 12**). She may have come to Pondicherry to marry an Indian, but her lifelong role as building manager facilitated the construction and maintenance of Golconde as a physical and spiritual nexus. This placemaking labor broadened the ashram's philosophical, cultural, and political reach beyond the dormitory's reinforced concrete walls.

Actors like Mona enable the creation and longevity of structures through practices of physical and social care. However, paradigms of authorship and creation fail to recognize many of the activities that shape structures, especially after the completion of the building object. Framing architecture as ongoing collaboration between a network of actors allows for the recognition of creators obscured by canonical, singular, typically male "architect" figures. Mona's work in particular shows the way in which the process of creation and construction continues long after the completion of the building object.

Mona's work at Golconde mediated philosophical and secular understandings of space within the ashram. By sustaining the building object, Mona implicitly served the spatial conceptual framework prescribed by Raymond's Modernist plan as well as Sri Aurobindo's philosophy. Unlike sadhaks, Mona's labor was not explicitly tied to her own spiritual development. Yet, her work melded the layers of philosophy overlaid over physical structure, enabling Golconde to function as a holistic expression of ashram and architectural narratives.

Mona's story serves as a vehicle to question the temporally static conception of the building object as well as notions of authorship in architectural practice. However,

questions remain, including whether she was compensated for her labor. Framing her work as emotional labor is complicated by this uncertainty as well as her unclear relationship to ashram philosophy. Mona's role begs the question: if a building is a process beyond construction, who is considered an architect? Who dwells, who creates, and who builds? ■

Notes:

1. Jeffrey Cook presented on Golconde at Perth's 1983 Solar World Congress, writing: "In one of the most remote parts of India, one of the most advanced buildings in the world was constructed under the most demanding of circumstances... This reinforced concrete structure was completed primarily by unskilled volunteers with the most uncertain of supplies, and with virtually every fitting custom-fabricated. Yet this handsome building has a world stature, both architecturally and in its bio-climatic response to a tropical climate 13 degrees North of the equator" (Cook, 1983).

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