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Le Corbusier's brave new India

Can Chandigarh, where the architect fully realised his modernist vision, provide the template for India's future urban growth? By James Crabtree



At 92 years old, MN Sharma is hard of hearing and more than a little frail. But his eyes still light up as he begins to reminisce about the time, more than half a century back, when he joined a small team of fellow architects to begin building the Indian city of Chandigarh – in the process meeting Le Corbusier, a man he would soon come to view as a mentor. In 1955, just a few years into the construction effort, Sharma recalls feeling “like a child” as he took the Swiss-French master planner to visit a house the young Indian had designed for his father. “He went around, and liked it. I was happy,” Sharma recalls. “My father didn’t realise I was taking a great man along with me.”

Le Corbusier, who was born Charles-Édouard Jeanneret and died 50 years ago this August, has a mixed reputation in the west. A giant of 20th century architecture, his radical reimagining of urban life left its imprint from Brasilia to New York. Yet many still view him as a modernist zealot: a man who dreamed up a plan to rattle the mach of Paris in 1925 by concreting over the 3rd and 4th arrondissements for a new business district dotted with vast, cruciform skyscrapers. In Chandigarh, however, such critics are hard to find. Sitting in his living room, its walls dotted with his mentor’s original drawings, Sharma is glowing. “To my mind it was the greatest experiment in the contemporary his-

tory of planning and architecture,” he says of the city. “And this experiment of Chandigarh was where Le Corbusier put all his previous experience.”

The result is an Indian city unlike any other. Standing roughly 250km north of New Delhi on the baking plains of Punjab, its orderly grid-system appears almost fantastical in a country whose urban centres are synonymous with chaos. Even rare exceptions such as the carefully planned heart of New Delhi only seem to underline that rule with the isolation of their peripheries.

By contrast, wide boulevards connect all 56 sectors in Chandigarh, each designed as a self-contained micro-neighbourhood with shops, schools and

Above: The High Court building in Chandigarh

entertainments. The surroundings are green too, with parks and tree-lined avenues to soften the effect of its largely concrete, block-like buildings. On a warm evening in early June, I watched in half-disguised amazement as locals gathered in a sprawling piazza in sector 17, the heart of the city. Young Sikh men in bright orange and green turbans sat on neat park benches, while

Nehru said it should “be a new town, symbolic of the freedom of India, unfettered by the past”



Le Corbusier at the High Court, 1955 (credit: Photo by the artist)

crowds gathered nearby to watch a musical fountain swoosh back and forth, to the rhythm of thumping Punjabi dance beats. The surrounding buildings, fabricated in concrete, were not much to look at. But the square itself was delightful, and unlike anything I had seen elsewhere in India – a country where pretty, pedestrianised European-style public spaces sadly remain a rarity.

The calm and order of contemporary Chandigarh marks a further contrast with the mayhem that preceded its foundation, in the bloody aftermath of partition. Lahore, the capital of Punjab, was lost to Pakistan in 1947, requiring a replacement. Le Corbusier was not an obvious candidate to design it, but his modernist vision appealed to Jawaharlal Nehru, as India’s first prime minister grasped for grand projects to express what he called “the nation’s faith in the future”. Visiting his new project in 1952, Nehru said it should “be a new town,

symbolic of the freedom of India, unfettered by the traditions of the past” – a visible means of breaking with a heritage of economic backwardness and colonial subjugation.

Pradeep Singh, deputy dean at the Indian School of Business, recalls that early spirit in the stories he was told by his parents. Singh’s father moved to the site of the city when it was little more than arid farmland, living in tents with the other planners, including both MN Sharma and Le Corbusier himself. “My father was just out of architecture school,” he says. “I was born a year later, so I imagine I was conceived in one of those tents. And that is also where Chandigarh was started too.”

Le Corbusier at first was sceptical, dismissing two Indian officials who visited his office at 35 rue de Sévres in Paris in 1950. But he gradually came round, tempted not by money – his salary was just £2,000 a year, well below his usual fee – but by the chance to give form to a lifetime of ideas. For India, by contrast, financial considerations were central. Facing exchange rate pressure in the years after independence, its government picked Le Corbusier over an American rival, in part because it could not afford to pay fees in dollars.

Having signed on, Le Corbusier refused to move to India, visiting just a few times each year. Yet while he was not the city’s only designer – the team included a handful of other senior architects – he was undeniably its most famous, adding glamour to independent India’s grandest project. “It is an event of global import, and it may cause talk

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People socialise in Sector 17 of Chandigarh (credit: Photo by the artist)

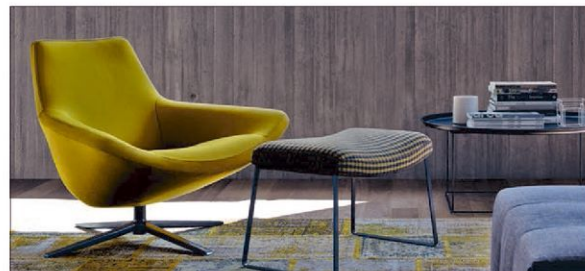
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For a video of James Crabtree’s visit to Chandigarh 50 years after the death of Le Corbusier, go to ft.com/chandigarh



A tightrope walker (credit: Photo by the artist)



Republic Day dancers (credit: Photo by the artist)



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