Maxwell Fry

Le Corbusier at Chandigarh

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The city of Chandigarh came first into my recognition in 1948 or 1949 as the whiff of a possible commission wafted via the Royal Institute of British Architects, but remaining without substance. The Punjab Government may have at that time been sending out feelers prior to meeting Albert Mayer, whom they commissioned to make a plan, with the brilliant young architect Matthew Nowicki.

However, the sudden death of Nowicki in 1950 necessitated the selection of a new architect for Chandigarh. When Prem Thapar, of the Indian Civil Service and the administrator of the project, with the chief engineer, P. L. Varma, called upon Jane Drew and myself at our office in the closing months of 1950, a complete plan existed for a city of 150,000 people, along with a detailed budget covering every ascertainable item, including thirteen grades of houses for government officials with the accommodation and the estimated cost set against each.

There was also a generous infrastructure of social and educational services and provision for the supply of water, drainage, and electricity to every level of dwelling provided, so that an examination of the budget and the well-advanced Mayer plan demonstrated the clear intention of the government to construct a modern city on a site selected to serve the state at the highest level of design and execution and set a new standard for India.

The state of the Punjab, truncated by partition, still suffered from the appalling ravages of a bitterly fought war, with millions homeless and landless and refugee camps still in the process of organization. It had lost its beloved capital Lahore to Pakistan; its government was gathered loosely in Simla, a ramshackle affair built only for summer occupation; and it needed a capital city for every practical, political, and spiritual purpose. That it should want and be prepared to build a capital of the first order was the mark of a courage and resolution that never flagged in all our dealings with it.

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At our first meeting with Thapar and Varma they asked for two architects to organize and supervise the architectural aspects of the Mayer plan. If Jane Drew and I had been able to drop every other obligation and accept the appointments, Corbusier would not have been approached.

It is no easy decision to drop every other obligation and decamp to India for three years as we were asked to do. I would have continued to decline, had not our chief client, the Inter-Universities Council, urged us to accept and to delegate the bulk of our responsibilities, as we did, to Lindsey Drake and Denys Lasdun who joined the partnership for the purpose.

But Jane Drew, foremost in urging acceptance, felt bound for a few months to her share of the Festival of Britain program, and this put Thapar in the dilemma of having two jobs to offer with only one filled. There would be little difficulty, he said, in fitting Jane Drew in when they returned to India, but they were instructed to fill both posts and meant to obey their instructions.

At this juncture Corbusier was first mentioned. Reflecting on the immensity of the architectural program for a three-year contract, I thought the Capitol group of buildings would be a fitting commission for the great man. "What would be the effect," said Thapar, "of introducing Corbusier to the team?" To which I replied, "Honour and glory for you, and an unpredictable portion of misery for me. But I think it a noble way out of the present difficulties."

So Jane Drew rang Corbusier and we all went to a meeting at his office, very dramatically arranged with a tape recorder that broke down under the pressure of high-minded resolutions. The conditions put forward by Thapar included the acceptance of the Mayer plan and the Project Budget as the working basis of the agreement, but in accepting them Corbusier insisted on the inclusion in the team of his cousin Pierre Jeanneret, from whom he had broken some time earlier.

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This was inconvenient for the Indians, and we tried to assure Corbusier that our loyalty to the project and to him was beyond doubt, but he persisted, and arrangements were concluded on that understanding.

We returned to London. I reached Simla at the end of 1950 and put up at Clarke's Hotel with Pierre Jeanneret. Both the hotel and the improvised office accommodation were primitive and cold; the Indian staff so far assembled was few in number and only partially trained. We were left much on our own except for a few meetings with the evasive but autocratic chief engineer. Jeanneret was cheerful but narrowly Parisian, with no aptitude for languages; as a consequence my French improved while all else deteriorated.

We had some drawings by Nowicki, which were rather romantically based on Indian idioms. Jeanneret and I started working on housing types while we absorbed the conditions of the Project Budget. I studied the Mayer plan and found by projecting sections along major road lines that the Capitol buildings which he saw enlaced with water were rather like Lutyens' Viceregal Palace at New Delhi, largely eclipsed by the profile of the approach road: they were obviously not well sited. I had doubts also as to the workability of its Radburn-like path system, which seemed to me to be out of scale with the enterprise; and the generally floppy form of its sector planning depressed me in the same way as that of Milton Keynes many years later.

I was at this period taking the appointment on trust but ready to resign if it grew worse. We had laid it down as a condition of our acceptance that we would not work under engineers, as was the custom in the Indian Public Works Department. I was experiencing the onset of a trial of strength with Varma, neglect by Thapar, and a general feeling of lassitude in the organization, the reverse of my experiences in Africa. Not wanting to waste my efforts, I put in a resignation to Thapar that brought him hot foot from his house to tell me that the

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project would fail without us and that he shared my problem with Varma. So I stayed.

The arrival of Corbusier galvanized the situation. We moved down to the Rest House in the lovely village of Chandigarh on the road to Kalkar, where the mountain railway starts for Simla. Corbusier, Varma, Jeanneret, myself, and intermittently Thapar were there; Albert Mayer was making his way to us from the south.

Without waiting for Mayer to appear, Corbusier started on large sheets of paper to approach a plan by a method of rough and ready analysis familiar to me from the workings of the Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM). First he outlined the main communications with the site on the map of India—air, railway, road (Fig. 93). Then he dealt with the site itself—its immediate background of low foothills rising to the sheer mountains of the Himalaya with the peaks beyond; its gentle plain declining at a fall of one in one hundred; its dry river beds to each side, with a smaller bed intermediate to the left; a diagonal road crossing the plan low down, and a loop of railway away on the right (Fig. 94).

It was a difficult situation. My French was unequal to the occasion. Jeanneret was supernumerary, and Thapar only half aware of what was going forward. Corbusier held the crayon and was in his element.

"Voilà la gare," he said, *"et voici la rue commerciale,"* and he drew the first road on the new plan of Chandigarh (Fig. 95). *"Voici la tête,"* he went on, indicating with a smudge the higher ground to the left of Mayer's location, the ill effects of which I had already pointed out to him. *"Et voilà l'estomac, le cité-centre."* Then he delineated the massive sectors, measuring each half by three-quarters of a mile and filling out the extent of the plain between the river valleys, with extension to the south.

The plan was well advanced by the time the anxious Albert Mayer joined the group. He must have had an unnerving journey, and he was

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Figure 93
The broad location of Chandigarh on the map of India. (Drawing by Maxwell Fry.)

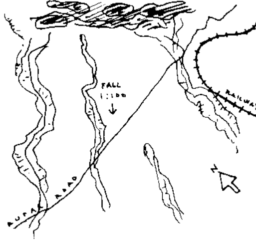

Figure 94
The context of the Chandigarh site. (Drawing by Maxwell Fry.)

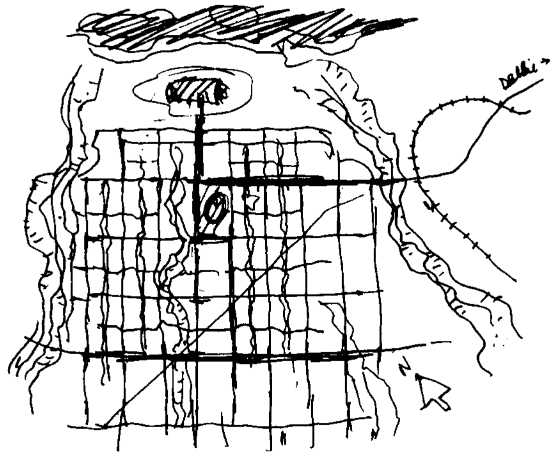

Figure 95
Le Corbusier's emerging plan for Chandigarh. (Drawing by Maxwell Fry.)

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too upset to make the most of his entry. I found him a high-minded decent man, a little sentimental in his approach, but good-humored; not in any way was he a match for the enigmatic but determined figure of the prophet.

We sat around after lunch in a deadly silence broken by Jeanneret's saying to Mayer, *"Vous parlez français, monsieur?"* To which Mayer responded, *"Oui, musheer, je parle,"* a polite but ill-fated rejoinder that cut him out of all discussion that followed.

And so we continued, with minor and marginal suggestions from us and a steady flow of exposition from Corbusier, until the plan as we now know it was completed and never again departed from. I stuck out for allowing Mayer to expose his theories in one of the sectors, out of pure *gentillesse* for a displaced person, and I suggested some curvature in the east-west roads to avoid boredom and to mitigate the effects of low sunlight on car drivers. Aside from these considerations, the plan stood, and on my advice Mayer signed it as a participant and later stood by his decision when the new plan was under fire in a cabinet meeting.

In 1950 Corbusier was offered the design of the Capitol buildings on a plan designed by Albert Mayer, and early in 1951 he had redesigned the whole capital plan so that he could turn his undivided attention to the design of a monumental group of buildings forming the culmination of his own plan.

This he could do with a calm mind for, by the time he came to it, he had recognized the existence of a firm and able organization, headed by Prem Thapar, a noble-minded administrator of supreme skill and integrity; a chief engineer of great experience, a man who though evasive and autocratic in his handling of affairs was of elevated mind and indomitable purpose; Jane Drew and I combining energy, creativity, and leadership; and Pierre Jeanneret, not the happiest of col-

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laborators, but a ceaseless worker in the good cause (Fig. 96).

After a time, in addition to Varma, Indian assistants of skill and promise emerged and devoted themselves heart and soul to his work; he came to rely on them with confidence.

Behind this organization stood the government of the state in full support, headed by Trevedi, a governor of some caliber; at Delhi was Jawaharlal Nehru, who valued Corbusier at his full weight and was prepared to pay him what he asked.

A friendship grew between us and Corbusier that lasted, particularly for Jane Drew, until his death. He could turn from his exhausting labors to evenings of ranging talk, with the bottle circulating, in an atmosphere of complete and happy relaxation. Jane Drew gave him colored papers and paste, and with one after another drawing and collage he brought in gestures of gratitude before the evening's talk. *"Pour toi, Jane; et celui-là, c'est pas si bon, pour vous, Maxwell."*

My relations with Corbusier were never intimate. I was never a disciple, as architects such as José Luis Sert was. The authoritative aspect of the Plan Voisin de Paris appalled me when I first saw it, and I preferred the classical clarity of Mies van der Rohe's Turgendhat Haus to the early houses of Corbusier, which I later came to value above most of his later work.

When Jane Drew arrived in Simla, Corbusier was in a huff about a remark I had made concerning a certain theatricality in the High Court design. We had shown Corbusier the Red Fort at Delhi and some of the stupendous Moghul ruins in the vicinity, and we had explained from our experience in West Africa the principle behind the achievement of shade temperature and the cooling effect of moving air under shaded conditions. *"Un parasol, en effet, hein?"* And a parasol he made for the High Court, the greatest of all canopies with just the merest reminiscence of Moghul influence.

At this time he was engrossed by visual effects of buildings in a big

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space. He had plans of the grand axis from the Louvre to the Arc de Triomphe reduced to appropriate scale and was continually testing his remembered impressions against the terrain upon which he was operating, as though seeking the ultimate possible, the furthest extension of grandeur comprehensible, at a single view, and this with buildings of asymmetrical disposition related only by the imaginary conversation they could maintain with each other across space.

If one compares with this arrangement the nearly instant recognition that perfect symmetry provides even for monuments as distant as the King George V arch and the Viceregal Palace at New Delhi, one may perhaps realize the nature of the struggle that was consuming him at that time, resolved, to the distress of some of his best friends, at the outer, if not beyond the outer limits of the possible.

From the level space between buildings he removed all roads by lowering them, but later allowed little hills to be formed with spoil, which must distract from the aimed-for impression. If in all this one could find cause for frustration, it must be set against the objectives, the first measure of the artist in all works of art.

There was an episode that I have never been able successfully to explain, which concerns the distribution of population over the plan sectors. We had accepted as something unshakable and inevitable the hierarchic disposition of the population from rich to poor, downward from the Capitol, and we could with no great difficulty have distributed the total of 150,000 over the plan. But Corbusier with some secrecy worked feverishly on a sort of computerization, some system he had in his mind, that would present us with the mosaic law of the matter, and somewhere in this computation was the hint of a row of high-rise buildings low down in the plan.

They never rose. Whether Thapar scotched them or not I never knew; I know only that the incomprehensible figures were not to my knowledge applied to the plan, which it was clear from the beginning

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was to be a poor state's capital in two dimensions, with no two-grade intersections in our lifetime.

Corbusier's sector planning reinforced this idea, with its legally protected boundaries and its strongly internal planning that showed up so well in the first-developed and still most used Sector 22. The sectors with their contrasting bands of daily activity, the cross-threading bazaar streets and cycle paths, and the circumambulatory feeder road to the housing make a pattern that shows him at his grandly logical, for if there were to be both the pressures and the resources of the British New Towns, the scheme would be more workable than it now is, the straight runs of motor road doubled in length, the cycle paths a reality with the aid of underpasses (Fig. 97).

There was a moment when he contemplated a regulatory system of proportion for all the housing of the city (which had hitherto lain outside his control and was the work of Jeanneret and ourselves), together with schools, colleges, hospitals, health centers, local political buildings, and so on, enough in all conscience. It was no more than a gesture of omnipotence or, more charitably, the hope expressed of an overall harmony to be the work of several hands. He did not press it.

More important was the loss of diversity and the small foreground scale of pavement commerce in the city center. I worked with Jane Drew on the shopping center of Sector 22 with its variety of multilevel shopping from closed stores to open booths; we had the direct collaboration of shopkeepers working to our models and giving us back something extra in the shape of connecting covered ways. Thus I was as anxious as Corbusier that the city center should preserve something of the intimacy, even the untidiness, of the typical Indian bazaar.

We both made drawings showing spaces enclosed by blocks of buildings—shops, offices, and residential accommodation—partly filled by booths or stalls, or merely selling space covered by both permanent and temporary canopies. It was not an easy exercise, be-

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Figure 96
Le Corbusier's office at Chandigarh. Standing left to right are Pierre Jeanneret, Jane Drew, Le Corbusier, Superintending Engineer G. C. Khanna, Chief Engineer P. L. Varma, and Maxwell Fry. (Photograph by Narindar Lamba, 1952.)

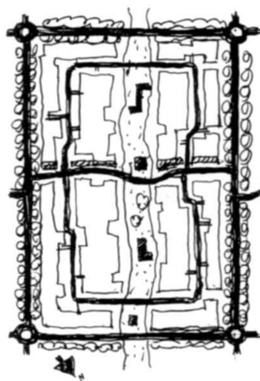

Figure 97
The working sector, as planned by Le Corbusier, with its legally protected boundaries. (Drawing by Maxwell Fry.)

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cause the size and actual function of the center was difficult to estimate; its financial practicability was quite indeterminate. Sector 22 was humming as the center of Chandigarh life, but its area was small when compared with the city center lying up and beyond this first residential sector to be developed.

I had left before it was begun in earnest, and I was taken aback by its stark brutality when I saw it years later. The scale was gargantuan but nearly devoid of the sort of surface marking or modeling by means of which Corbusier established scale, as with the High Court. It was devoid of intimate street level activity and treeless! What had happened in the interval? I do not know. There is grandeur in the great colonnaded blocks. I am not averse to size as an element in urban composition, but even along the all-purpose entry road I found blocks of unidentifiable blankness that verged on the vacantly forbidding, a form of excess to which I was entirely unable to respond. It was one of the (I fear) vanishing pleasures of New Delhi to come across Lutyens' influence in the detailing of humble lengths of servants quarters or the like, and I had hoped to find this element in Chandigarh and sorely missed it.

Corbusier said to me one day that he was interested only in art. I felt this in his persistent withdrawal from what might be called vulgar contact, the ordinariness that makes up the bulk of mankind and is both its strength and weakness. The loneliness of the great artist shut off by the mere weight of the concentrated effort of creation has been spoken of by Conrad and many another. With a writer such as Balzac or Dickens, contact was the material of the work, but with Corbusier this was not so. I imagine that he peopled his buildings, where indeed they gave the appearance of being peopled, by figments of his own creation, unendowed with normal human attributes; and that as he grew older and more withdrawn, these counted for less than the elemental forms reaching forward to ultimate ruination.

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I would warn those who hope by pecking over the remains of the great—the diairies, letters, reported conversations, photographs, and so on—that they will be permitted to pierce to the heart of the mystery that makes men great. One has only to read the biographies, even the autobiographies, of the grandly creative to find in their contact with the world continuous frustrations, bitternesses, misunderstandings, and rejections, until death ends them—and not these alone, but as often as not, the meannesses, treacheries, and shabbinesses; the envies and vanities, especially the vanities, the defensive vanities that cloud the daily conduct of those otherwise rapt away from the world. It is a dangerous occupation, and few have succeeded in elevating it through some lucky gift of sympathy or from feelings of fellow suffering.

A French critic once said that the beginning of all criticism was contained in the words *Que c'est beau*—how beautiful it is. Without this surely all criticism is vain that seeks to define the exactitude of pleasures that come and go and swell and fade.

Coming to Chandigarh twenty years after I had labored in the field, and with the memory of such criticism in my mind, I went in and about it on a lovely December morning. It was unfinished, poorly maintained, vulgarized in parts, and with standards lowered in large extensions beyond the original plan. Yet I had to say, "*Que c'est beau!* How noble a thing this is!"

I went round with that same engineer with whom I had fought and at whose renewed requests I had come on a sentimental journey to see old friends before we died. And he took me before everything else to see the lake that was in his mind from the beginning, yet had to wait the moment until the tide of recognition and success made it possible, and had to make it then to the limits and to more than the limits of what was possible.

We walked together along the curving sweep of the embankment

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that was his, not Corbusier's, an embankment he had made ten times wider than was strictly necessary, knowing that it would become the promenade for the city and therefore should be on a scale to match it.

This lake is a contribution to the city that represents for me its soul. It is not less, but differently, the creation of Corbusier's also, for in the association with men of great insight and purpose, works arise of a nature like their own. Since we were not entirely without either of these attributes, we felt the exhilaration and the deep polarization of effort that Corbusier brought to the enterprise, though he barely lifted his head from his work and was only faintly amused by demonstrating it.

This is as I saw him. It seems utterly irrelevant to me how far a man, with the objectives that he had constantly before him, fell below them. The last time we saw him in his apartment in Paris—the place growing old and dusty around him, a sycamore tree bursting the terrace flower box it had seeded itself into—he was all agog with the opportunities enamels presented as an extension of painting. Glasses on his forehead, he groped about in the accumulation of the years to show us his latest experiments in the medium. Gone were the suspicions that clouded the first and fateful meeting many years ago; a simple single-hearted man was sharing his new-found enthusiasm with old friends.

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