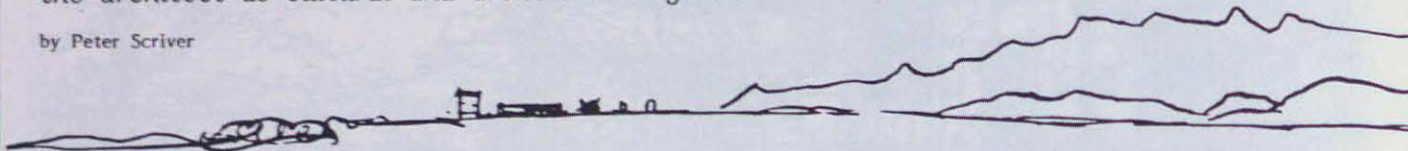


# CHANDIGARH

*Reflections on the Western architectural experience in India:  
the architect as cultural and artistic demi-god...*

by Peter Scriver



THE BRILLIANT GLARE of the Punjabi plain at midday dazes the eyes as they strain to distinguish the white brilliance of snow from the hundred-ten degree dance of dust occluding the horizon. The bus careens eastward, plying the cacaphony of life which rides the asphalt highway in an endless, aimless stream. Slowly the mountains reveal themselves in the distance: the Himalayas. Immense and defiant, they rear up out of the haze with snowy summits peering other-worldly down through a vanguard of arid escarpments to the fiery plain at their feet. I'm enraptured with the magnificence of the sight and only casually do I notice the gathering bedlam of settlement cluttering the foreground as the bus decelerates. Conspicuously regimental rows of densely-packed housing have suddenly sprung up from the dusty paddy fields. In construction they are crude concrete and block and mortar structures, familiar to the Asia-worn traveller, but something nags uneasily. Absent is the labyrinthine integration of the familiar townscape. These housing blocks are islands in a sea of searing space.

The bus stops and the bulk of the passengers descend there at the settlement's motley edge. The road, wide, black, and barren, goes on arrow-straight. Housing rows give way to clusters; clusters give way to single dwellings - quaint, mundane, suburban. On the right, a colourless mass of three-storey concrete commercial blocks drifts beyond view in regimental file. On the left, goats graze on the parched stubble of 'Leisure Valley', a vast civic parkland. Life clings to the scarce shadows and is stifled.

I have not arrived; there is no centre. The road is a parkway and a by-pass; it cleaves and compartmentalizes. And suddenly, I have passed through to the edge of settlement again. The mountains rear up before me, uncluttered.... But no, there is

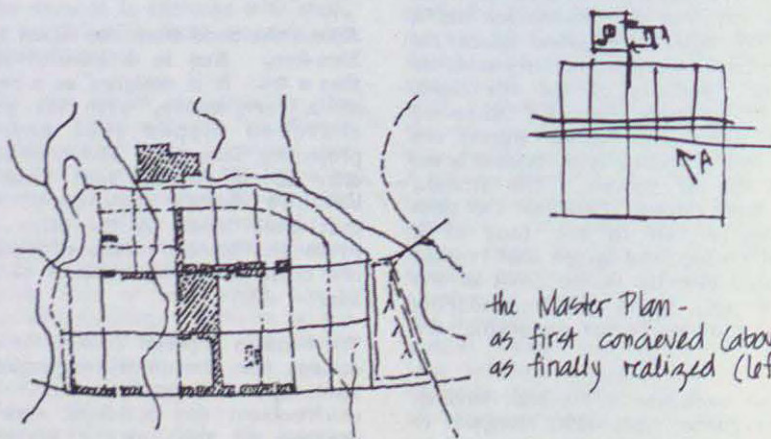
something else, something sublime and sculptural which exalts in the vastness and magnificence of the backdrop. Three lonely monuments, nearly obscured in the scrubby terrain, sing the silent anthem of an enigma - stilted idealism and reckless genius. Behind me, across the road, the vacuous, shabby reality stretches away into the distance.

## The Idea

Chandigarh is still more an *Idea* than the city it has tried to become. It is the catharsis that the young nation of India sought to absolve the blood, the pain, and the uncertainty of its cession in 1947 from British Colonial Rule and the Muslim state of Pakistan. The building of a national symbol and a model for 'modern', progressive growth was the idealistic impetus for this contemporary manifestation of an historical Indian passion for creating instant cities from dust. Chandigarh is a state capital, conceived to fill the need for a new seat of government in the decimated State of Punjab which, when divided in the Pakistan Partition, lost the city of Lahore, the traditional political and cultural centre of the State. But, this

provincial *raison d'être* must be seen as secondary to the overriding nationalist character of the project - one which has gone on to inspire and shape several other national capital projects in the developing world, notably Brasilia and Islamabad.

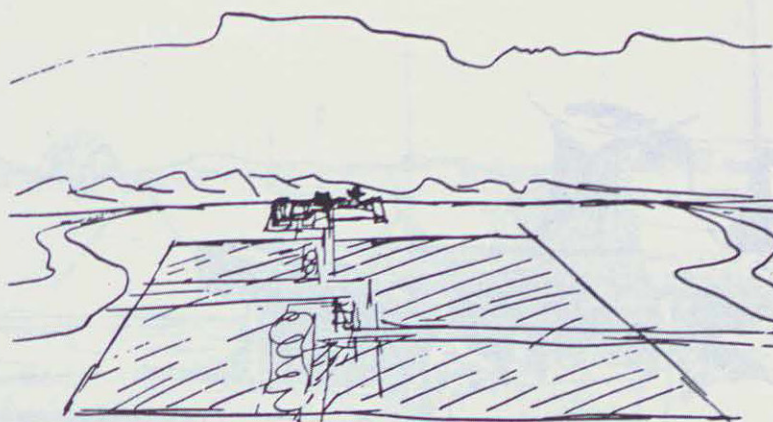
The British had deprived the independent India of the opportunity to build its own assertive national capital with the overbearing colonial legacy of New Delhi. This totalitarian masterpiece of Lutyens, Baker, and Lanchester is a regal-ritual urban desert of immense scale, pomposity... and beauty. In all objectivity its ceremonial megalomania is only paralleled in this age by Speer's project for Reichs Berlin. Only with difficulty can one deny its seductive power which, in order and spirit, continues to coddle the governing elite in a reassuring aura of neo-colonialism a generation and a half after Britain's shrewdly calculated loss. With this understanding one may also appreciate the initial searching idealism of the young Indian republic, which forcefully looked away from its acquired capital to Chandigarh as the altar on which the self-determined image of the modern India would be built.



the Master Plan -  
as first conceived (above) and  
as finally realized (left).



Chandigarh - an early  
concept sketch  
by 'Corb.



In its post-war heyday, the International Style offered India both an image of universal equality in the worldwide rebuilding effort of the time, and the dogmatic rebuttal of all tradition and regionalism in style, to dissipate India's fears of a backward provincialism in the eyes of the world. Le Corbusier, formative master of the genre, was the obvious and prestigious architect to seek out for the execution of Chandigarh's high ideals.

#### The Master

Le Corbusier at Chandigarh is the best and the worst of an undoubted genius. Whereas his patrons sought to fulfill the 'idea' of Chandigarh through Corbu's design vision, the Master in his official role of coordinating architect and planner sought to fulfill his own long-formulated ideals. There seems to have been little compromise.

Late in his career, the Chandigarh commission offered Le Corbusier the long-awaited opportunity to implement the urban planning manifestoes of his polemical youth. This he did despite their blatant incongruity with India's prevailing physical and cultural parameters: His immunity from self-doubt was guaranteed by a cocoon of veneration from his patrons, and the arrogance of a great artist. His sole but fervent commitment, it appears, was to the perfection and

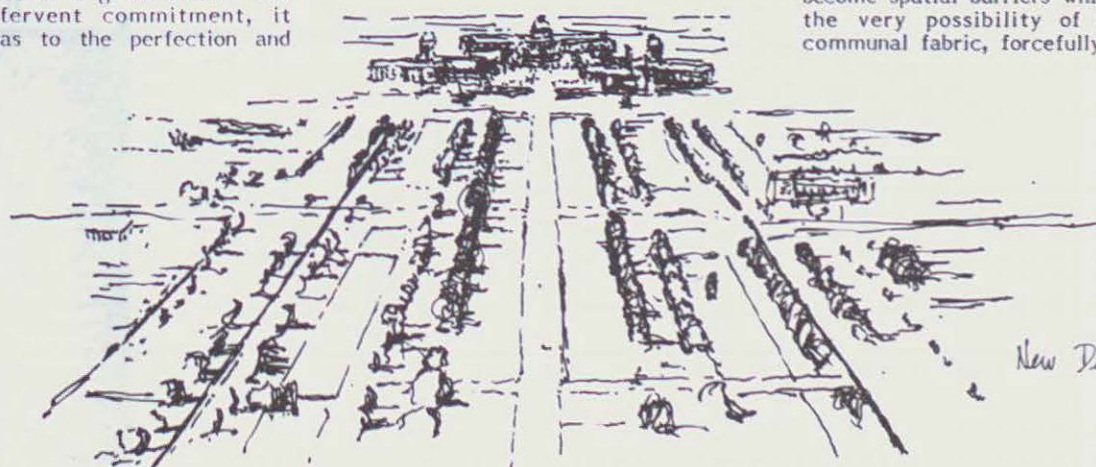
execution of the ideal systems in his art. Once fully and purely stated, the act was complete. Functional and contextual congruity of the design were matters of uncertain success and of apparently less concern in the mind of Corbu.

To design a city is an awesome and brazen endeavour. The problem is so complex and convoluted that the planner must inevitably empiricize the design process to a logical network of intelligent assumptions and solutions. But, to cite an appropriate mathematical analogy proposed by Christopher Alexander, "the city is not a tree," in the sense of the planner's tree diagram schema, but an immensely more sophisticated "semi-lattice" structure. Alexander states that the naturally evolved city has "the structure of living things; of great paintings and symphonies." The urban designer cannot expect to achieve the complexity of the semi-lattice in a single mental act; it is the product of time and culture. Le Corbusier sketched his master plan for Chandigarh on the first morning of his first visit to the site. He never looked back.

No doubt, to the chagrin of his

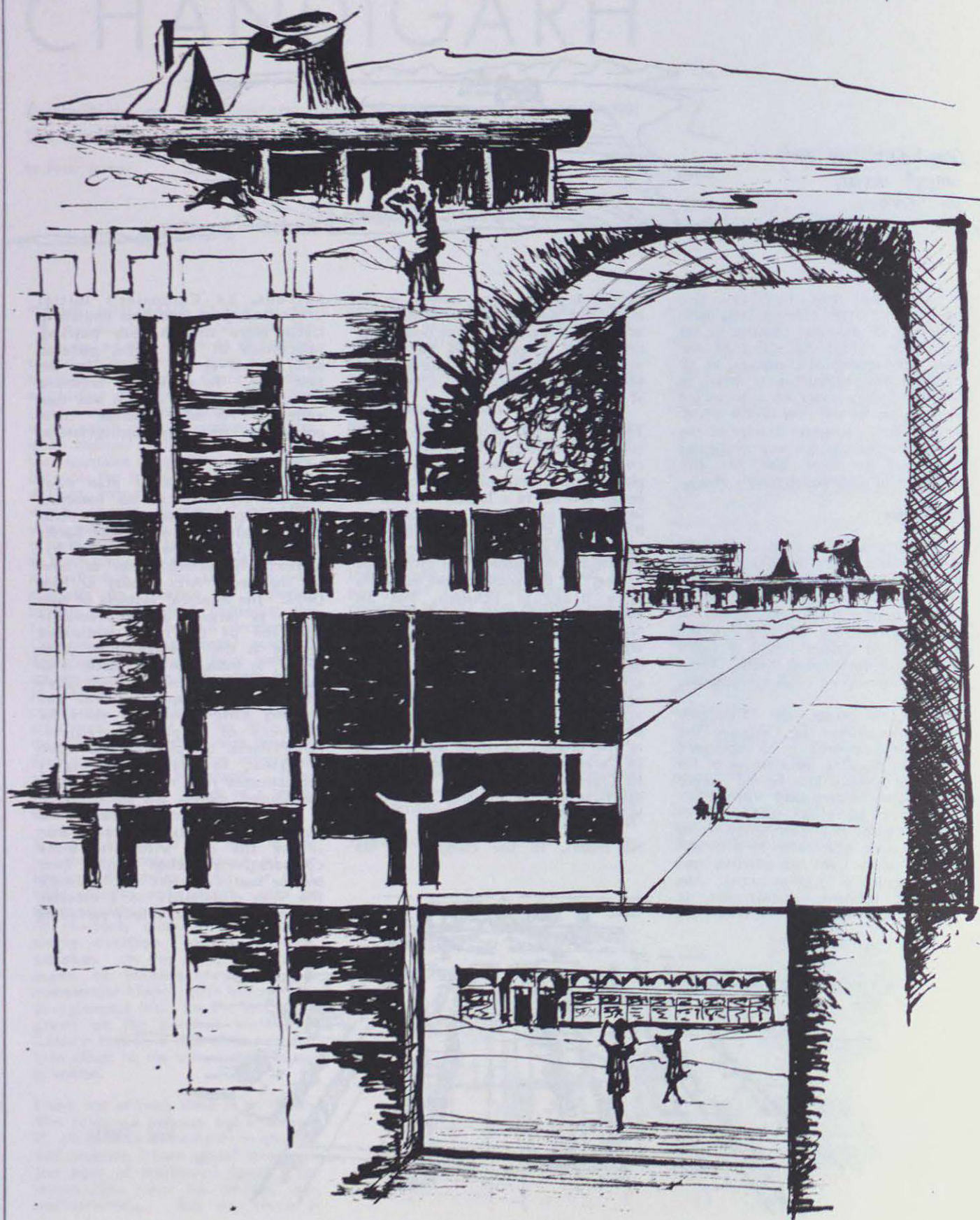
patrons, Le Corbusier's initial understanding of India was limited to little more than a very positive impression of New Delhi, gathered upon arrival in the country for the first time. To an already brimming cup of preconceived notions was then added a forceful 'Indian' form conception... ironically inappropriate as it was.

Le Corbusier's master plan most suggestively reflects the immense, ludicrous spaciousness of the national capital, although one could hardly expect Corb to forsake his distinctively personal order of form for the Beaux Arts axiality of New Delhi. The maniacal vastness of both cities is largely an unpardonable function of the rapid motorized vehicle as the determinant of urban scale. In India, the automobile is an expensive, government-regulated luxury in very short supply. Even the wealthy elite must wait years for delivery of a private vehicle. Nevertheless, the plan of Chandigarh remains, in essence, a highly sophisticated road map. The city is commanded, shaped, and subdivided by a complex hierarchy of faster and slower thoroughfares. But, rather than infuse the city with life, these comparatively lifeless arteries have become spatial barriers which strangle the very possibility of a cohesive communal fabric, forcefully parcelling





the Capitol





*Madaya-Marg (right), the main cultural and commercial axis.*



the city into thirty autonomous residential sectors. Nothing could be further from the urban ideal of **quartiers**, the harmonious, dense integration of commercial and residential communities, of which traditional India was a grand master. Chandigarh consists of suburban archipelagoes; all significant business and administrative activity is removed to an independent central commercial sector. Nothing could be more true to a culturally baseless 'Internationalism'.

Parks are the obvious, if ludicrous, extension to Le Corbusier's self-created dogma of urban design. Large open spaces in each sector and a great central swath of public (green) space running the full north-south axis of the city complete the formula for the virtuous metropolis of light, space, and air. The fact that the merciless tropic sun virtually dessicates both the landscape and the potential recreationist in these shadeless wastes completely inverts Le Corbusier's intentions, to further provoke the anti-urbanistic divisiveness of his ideals as applied at Chandigarh.

Housing is an issue not rightly discussed in terms of Le Corbusier for it was his cousin Pierre Jeanneret, with Maxwell Fry, Jane Drew, and a myriad of associated Indian architects, who designed all of the government-built housing units and blocks (the remaining seventy percent of the real estate has been developed privately). The master-planner must still be held responsible, however, for what must be judged as the greatest misfortune of this most fundamental dimension of the city, the economic and geographic hierarchy of housing sectors. Here again, the elitist overtones of colonial New Delhi recur in Corb's fetish for homogenous enclaves in a strongly hierarchical society. He zones the rich, prestige, car-driving sectors together within easy walking distance of the Capitol Complex, the functional and

ideological heart of the city which, however, sits entirely remote from the city grid. As one progresses away from the Complex, through the city proper, the spatial and unit densities of housing in each successive sector increase proportionately to the distance travelled. At the distant edge of town, one has reached the lowest of the fourteen distinct grades of government housing, designated according to occupational status in the government service from the highest ministers to poorest sweepers; Grade 14 - low-rise bee hives floating lonely in a fiery brown emptiness. It is a long way by crowded bus to the place of work at the opposite end of town.... With the smokescreen of a deceptively 'democratic' architectural expression, Corb has restated in plan the colonial maxim that some few will rule and reap the rewards of a society supported, otherwise, by the toil and discomfort of the majority.

One could go too righteously into such political allegations, risking insulting patronism with respect to contemporary Indian society. But, an interesting observation remains: Chandigarh is not sociologically regressive, technically speaking. Its alien rigidity of plan does as much to defuse the common structures of social intercourse conducive to the archaic caste system of traditional India as to fortify the present colonial order. It goes a step further, in fact, to instill, with the most painfully empirical physical parameters, the new sociological stigma of class consciousness. Still a long way from a generalized industrialization of the society, which might give a Marxist credence and direction to such a consciousness, Chandigarh, with its intractable segregation and humiliating pigeon-holing, merely cuts its population adrift from their traditional mainstream to tangle antagonistically in an imported social order; a paradox of stymied development.

Le Corbusier's work is never simple;

one can never underestimate his frustrating genius. Where Chandigarh is perhaps his greatest, most insensitive folly in the dimensions of culture and urbanism, it is also an unquestioned triumph in the terms of his definition of architecture which, proclaimed (but distorted) early in his career, spoke most tellingly of his last works: "...the masterly, correct, and magnificent play of masses brought together in light...." In the end, the artist in Le Corbusier triumphed over all else: machine worship, function, social zealotism... even his mesmerising intellect. His Capital Complex (the only substantial architectural entity that he personally designed at Chandigarh) is the purest of sculpture. The three concrete monoliths (Secretariat, Legislature, and High Court) and the vast, empty plaza they share, transcend all mundane meaning. The petty bureaucracy they house is but the slowly destructive working of termites in the members of temples to far greater gods... function is a joke. Le Corbusier shuns his own urban appendage and jumps beyond its confines to the mountain's edge. With bamboo formwork and the labour of thousands, he extrudes from the sun-bitten ground brutal space-radiating volumes which sing in awesome, silent harmony to the mountains... and above and beyond to that god of his own creativity.

#### Epilogue...The Enigma

At an appropriately ceremonial spot, the inaugural proclamation by first Indian Prime Minister Nehru reads: "...Chandigarh, symbolic of the freedom of India unfettered by the traditions of the past...." In the shade of the brooding legislature, spalled concrete about her skirts, a young woman kneels by the stagnant waters of the reflecting pool washing linen in the manner of timeless tradition. □

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