

---

# FIVE DAYS IN LE CORBUSIER'S UTOPIA

Text: SALKA HALLSTRÖM BORNOLD  
Photos: DAVID RELAN

---

Chandigarh is a modernist utopia that has become a weathered architectural shrine. Salka Hallström Bornold walks among the curving concrete colossi and flying foxes of Le Corbusier's dream city at the foot of the Himalayas.

“Energy misused cannot be excused.” “The less you burn, the more you earn.” The road to Chandigarh is lined with such pearls of wisdom, printed on big billboards to remind us of the vision of Le Corbusier's and Nehru's grand experiment. It started out as a peaceful utopia: the country's first planned city, built by the first Indian prime minister after liberation from British colonial rule. It was, according to Nehru, “an expression of the nation's belief in the future”.

Instead, a line from a Stagnelius poem pops into my head. “Decay, make haste...” A little blasphemous, maybe, since Chandigarh is far from dispossessed by the world. The Brasilia of India lies at the foot of the Himalayas, on the boundary of the states of Punjab and Haryana, a subtropical Manhattan of past-its-prime brutalist concrete and a beloved national treasure nominated to the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2006.

It is a functioning utopia, despite having twice the population – just over a million – it was originally planned for. Chandigarh is said to be the cleanest, most prosperous city in India, with the most cars and the highest per capita income.

And yet decay is making haste. The concrete is crumbling and cracking. Some neighbourhoods peter out into ramshackle slums. Others look like war zones, with shafts of naked rebar sticking out of the facades.

Le Corbusier's city plan, which was copied by Chandigarh's younger sister cities, Mohali and Panchkula, is both visionary and outdated. Its traffic solution, with roundabouts instead of crossings, makes driving genuinely pleasant compared with the death-defying chaos of Delhi, 250 kilometres to the south. However, dividing the city into independent sectors isolates people from one another. At the northern end of the city is the Capitol, Le Corbusier's famous government complex, tucked away like majestic ruins behind the trees.

– What do you mean, you don't think it's nice? asks our guide, Santosh, with a look of melancholy. We're standing around like a flock of idle insects on the deserted esplanade of the Capitol, which truly is magical, if dilapidated. Like a modernist necropolis, perhaps. This late in the game, some of the designs still haven't been realised. The pyramidal monument, Geometric Hill, was supposed to be a sundial. Now it has settled back down into the

The Student Centre at Panjab University was inaugurated in 1975. By Indian architect BP Mathur.





Student work in the backyard of the College of Arts (1959), designed by Le Corbusier. The sculpture is made of garbage.

And yet decay is making haste. The concrete is crumbling and cracking. Some neighbourhoods peter out into ramshackle slums. Others look like war zones.

earth and is overgrown with grass. The monument with the open iron hand – the symbol of Chandigarh, “open to receive, open to give” – which moves like a Picasso windsock despite its weight, stands in a sunken amphitheatre whose acoustics eliminate the need for microphones and loudspeakers. Yet it has never been anything other than a tourist attraction.

– Oh yes, it’s going to be renovated; there’s a maintenance plan and a budget, says Santosh. Santosh was born in Chandigarh, one of many relatives of the villagers who made their land available to the city when it was being planned in the 1950s.

– They built for government personnel first, when western Punjab went to Pakistan and they built Chandigarh to replace the provincial capital of Lahore. It took a long time – 30–40 years – before ordinary Indians wanted to live here. They didn’t understand the infrastructure, didn’t understand the houses. Now lot prices are through the roof. It has become the city everybody wants to live in.

From the outside, the three colossi look prehistoric in their immensity: the High Court, the Secretariat and the Palace of the Assembly, which is shared by two state governments. The Capitol is cordoned off by barbed wire and populated by sleepy soldiers and women who slowly, Sisyphus-like, sweep the paving stones with tiny homemade brooms. You have to go through the bureaucratic wringer to get in. There are several security checks, includ-

ing a body search and a variety of paperwork. A guard guides us through a tiny fraction of the interior rooms, through winding staircases, looking out through oval ventilation holes and completely losing any sense of where we are. The place is a study in dictatorial scale, geometric harmonies and sculptural concrete, from the arched brise-soleil roof of the Assembly to the broken facade patterns of the Secretariat and the High Court. Le Corbusier, who started out as a watchmaker in his native Switzerland, built in mechanical functions. Windows and ceilings are placed at ingenious angles to generate a pleasant indoor climate. It works like a Swiss watch.

- You like it? the bureaucrat wants to know.
- Of course.
- Thank you, thank you.

**L**e Corbusier’s manifesto for Chandigarh, published as *The Establishment Statute of the Land* in 1959, is both authoritarian and poetically formulated, like a proclamation. It is venerated as if it were a tablet of commandments. The architect admonished the residents to be guardians of Chandigarh and “save it from whims of individuals.” Human scale should prevail, placing the people “in touch with the infinite cosmos and nature”. Parks and the artificial Sukhna Lake were to be spared “the curse



Ghandi Bhavan (1962) by Pierre Jeanneret used to stand in a pool of water, but not anymore. Below: Staff housing in 22, by Jane Drew and Maxwell Fry.





The houses in Chandigarh are still designed according to Le Corbusier's strict rules.

It took a long time before ordinary Indians wanted to live here. They didn't understand the infrastructure, didn't understand the houses. Now lot prices are through the roof. It has become the city everybody wants to live in.

of noise". The only building materials permitted were concrete, brick and stone. Memorials dedicated to individuals would be limited to bronze plaques, for "the age of personal statues is gone". Instead, the city should be perfused with sublime art. "The seed of Chandigarh is well sown," Le Corbusier proclaimed. "It is for the citizens to see that the tree flourishes."

Has the tree of Chandigarh borne fruit? In my five days in the city, I meet no-one who isn't proud to live in Le Corbusier's megalomaniacal masterpiece.

– It's better here than in the villages – cleaner and nicer than anywhere else in India, says J.P. Singh. He is a Sikh, a teacher of graphic design at the Le Corbusier-designed Government College of Art, and a native of Chandigarh. Singh shows off the gracious design of the school and its clever functional solutions, such as the runoff-watered interior courtyard and the fine natural light.

– Look, he says, pointing to the high windows up near the ceiling.

– The beauty of this building is in its space and light. We like it because we don't need electricity; we always have daylight and cool air. It's big, too. I can let the students go here to create whatever they like. They're like kids at a playground.

Singh brings us out to the outdoor studio, where a few students are chipping away at sculptures in the open air.

– There isn't any ism influencing young artists today. We are

in a phase of experimentation at the intersection of modernity and historic Indian art.

**What period are we talking about?**

– The Mughal period. Cave paintings.

As it turns out, the human scale isn't all that human after all. Though the walkways seem to have been drawn to accommodate tanks, you can't walk in Chandigarh: the distances are too great and the pavements too broken. In the heart of the city, in sector 17, there's a giant square that could have been imported from a European city. It is apparently chronically deserted. The little in-between spaces are full of life, however. Monkeys strut like gangsters down the endless roadsides, and colonies of giant bats known as flying foxes can be found here and there, sleeping like inverted parasols in the trees. When they stretch their wings, you can see their fox faces and red bellies. I am assured that they only eat flowers and fruit.

– It's a lot more Indian now, says Jürg Gasser. He is an architectural photographer from Zürich, and first visited Chandigarh in 1971, to visit and photograph his old friend M.N. Sharma, Chandigarh's first Indian chief architect.

– A jungle of life has taken over. In the future, only the skeletons of the buildings may be left. Life is stronger than architecture.

In July 1965, he wanted to make a film on Le Corbusier and had



Government Model Senior Secondary School, Chandigarh. Below: Inside the High Court, inaugurated in 1952. The entrance columns were painted later.



# ANNONS



The sunken amphitheatre, below the Open Hand monument. In the background: Geometric Hill, the Secretariat (1953) and the Palace of the Assembly (1955).

Several years after Le Corbusier's death, leavings from the Indus Valley culture were found in sector 17. An older Chandigarh may very well be buried under the new, like a weathered blueprint swaddled in earth.

a brief meeting with him. A month later, the great man took a holiday at his hermit's cottage, Le Cabanon, on the French Riviera. He swam out into the sea and died.

– He had a powerful aura, as I recall. This was not somebody you argued with. I was like a little kitten, and he was a lion.

Three years later, young Jürg visited Le Corbusier's Indian dream city.

– At the time, 15,000 people lived here, and there were a couple hundred cars. Cows wandered around freely, and the remains of villages could still be seen. I could go anywhere I wanted, in and out of the government buildings, without anybody asking any questions.

He shows me his pictures from the 1960s of the embryonic Chandigarh, full of half-finished and finished residences and institutions on a gravel plain: Le Corbusier's blindingly white visions in concrete plunked down in an Indian landscape of cattle and farmers.

– Le Corbusier had no particular experience working in a subtropical climate, other than having been a consultant to Oscar Niemeyer in Rio de Janeiro. So they hired a British couple who had that expertise, Jane Drew and Maxwell Fry. And Le Corbusier's cousin, Pierre Jeanneret. Jeanneret lived here for a long time, until 1965. Le Corbusier only came once a year or so.

The original city plan was drawn up by the socially engaged

American architect Albert Mayer. Not until 1950 was the job taken over by the then 60-something Swiss-French architect Charles-Édouard "Le Corbusier" Jeanneret-Gris. The plan has come to be described as a metaphor for the human body, with the Capitol Complex as the city's head. The university is its right arm and industry its left. The shopping district is the heart, and through the middle of the city centre run the lungs – a park called the Leisure Valley and a surprisingly impractical, water-intensive rose garden. The sectors, the rectangular cells of the city grid, were planned as identical 800 by 1,200 metre microcosms, their interiors shaped in figure-eights, with services and parkland at the core.

– It's not wrong to build a new city, but it's impossible to conserve it, says Jürg Gasser.

– Le Corbusier separated all the functions – you were supposed to live in one place and work in another. But functions change. Today you can work at home on a computer. Le Corbusier couldn't have predicted that.

**T**he history of the city is on display behind glass and frames at another of Chandigarh's holy sites, the old architect's office in sector 19. The modestly designed concrete box where Le Corbusier commanded his army of architects is now a museum full of his bombastic letters and documents. Inside, in a glass case, is a model of the Governor's Palace, the fourth colossus



The Palace of the Assembly, behind barbed wire. To the right: A glimpse of the War Memorial, adorned with a sun cross.

The place is a study in dictatorial scale, geometric harmonies and sculptural concrete, from the arched brise-soleil roof of the Assembly to the broken facade patterns of the Secretariat and the High Court.

# ANNONS

of the Capitol, which was never built, as Nehru felt it was a poor fit for democratic principles. Along the walls are well preserved examples of the furniture Jeanneret designed for the city, made of local materials such as rosewood, teak and rattan. As a gesture of respect to the city's Sikhs and Hindus, the leather came from cows that died of natural causes. Much of the furniture is said to have been thrown away until recently, when it attracted the attention of European collectors.

- We discovered that the furniture was selling for several thousand dollars apiece at an auction in France, says Santosh.
- A committee has been established to preserve it.

There are, it turns out, several Chandigarhs. Ironically, it's not the Capitol that draws the most tourists, but rather its antithesis. The Rock Garden, a tourist attraction both bizarre and psychologically mysterious, is adjacent to Sukhna Lake. While Chandigarh was under construction, road inspector Nek Chand Saina was building his own labyrinthine mini-city in the forest, on municipal land. For twelve years, he laboured in secrecy, building towers out of water jugs, frescoes of power plugs, and thousands of statues that look like Indian villagers, the streets, waterfalls and sculptures made of materials that were left over from the thirteen villages. The Rock Garden is everything Chan-

digarh is not. Organic, small-scale and built in the shadows. It is not entirely far-fetched to interpret it as a local protest against the advance of European brutalist concrete.

Yet Le Corbusier did not lack a feeling for history. His street network was inspired by the bronze-age cities of the Indus Valley Civilisation, which have been excavated throughout northwestern India. The Valley people designed jewellery and sculptures, large-scale bathhouses and central temples. They designed their houses in rectangular rows made of sun-baked brick, not unlike the staff housing of architects Drew and Fry in sector 22. Several years after Le Corbusier's death, leavings from the Indus Valley culture were found in sector 17. An older Chandigarh may very well be buried under the new, like a weathered blueprint swaddled in earth.

I run across a typically high-flown snippet of Le Corbusier, dateline Chandigarh, 1954: "India did not have to live through the problematic beginnings of the initial machine age. On the contrary, she is awakening now, intact, in an era of great possibilities. But India is not a new country. She has lived through the highest and oldest of civilisations." Le Corbusier has been called the Pol Pot of architecture, a despotic urban planner who wanted to erase the past and start over from scratch in the Year Zero. But India is not a new entity. Neither is Chandigarh. ☯