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Le Corbusier's Ruin
The Changing Face of Chandigarh's Capitol

More than fifty years since its making, Chandigarh's Capitol Complex, designed by Le Corbusier remains a celebrated paradigm of Modern architecture and urbanism. But how has the 1950s Capitol been understood and accepted by its intended citizenry over half a century of India's sovereignty and post-colonization? This article traces the Capitol's multifarious guises—from what was originally envisioned, to what was built, to what it has become today—and speculates on its potential future identities. Through this post-occupancy review, it seeks to re-contextualize the Capitol's contemporary identity beyond its celebrated Corbusian profile, as an evolving compound trapped between its original intentions and their unforeseen consequences.

Introduction

For all his association with Chandigarh, Le Corbusier was not the first choice for its design; in fact he was not even the second. The American planner Albert Meyer in collaboration with Polish architect Mathew Nowicki had generated a plan for Punjab's new capital in 1947.[1] But with Nowicki's sudden death in 1950, their effort had come to a freeze, and the administrators had approached the British architects Jane Drew and Maxwell Fry who, pre-occupied with ongoing work suggested Le Corbusier as a possible lead. With his initial reluctance leading to a carefully conditioned acceptance, Le Corbusier landed in India for the first time in February 1951.[2] Within six weeks he ''rationalized'' the curved streets of Meyer's scheme into an orthogonal grid, re-apportioned its proposed ''Villages'' into ''Sectors'' thrice as large, reduced the quantity of roads, and increased the overall density (Figure 1). By the time Prime Minister Nehru formally opened Chandigarh in October 1953, Le Corbusier's reputation had propelled it to instant international attention. Architects and historians from all over came to witness what would be the largest built project of the master architect.

Nehru's vision for a new modern capital had emerged amidst the traumatic partition between India and Pakistan in August 1947. In this event, Lahore, the capital of the state of Punjab, was transferred into Pakistan, creating the need for a new one. For Nehru, Chandigarh was not simply this new capital, but an emblematic proclaim of sovereign India's modernity on the world stage; an embodiment of his faith in the modern way of living, from which the future of India was to emerge. In translating that vision, not only had Le Corbusier transformed India's destiny, but he had also seemingly fulfilled Nehru's political stratagem of suppressing India's colonial consciousness and embodying her latent optimism through the Modernist ideals of this new city.

Yet, much of Chandigarh's magnetism lay less in the city, and more in its Capitol Complex that Le Corbusier had so meticulously designed. This new administrative center built in *beton brut* seemed to hold the intellectual gravity of the entire polis despite its physical detachment from it. Le Corbusier had located it at the ''head'' rather than in the middle of the city creating an isolated setting whose only visible context was the distant Siwalik range and whose only limitation was the Nehruvian behest for an architecture bearing no resemblance to India's past. With Le Corbusier's formal abstraction only reinforcing Nehru's Modernist aspirations, by the time the Assembly, High Court and Secretariat were built, the image of Chandigarh, forgetting Drew, Fry and Jennerret's housing, was almost exclusively associated with these sculptural buildings. The Capitol was first an emblem, then an urban center; its architecture was always meant to be filled with the values and meanings of a new India, ''not… the rules and regulations laid down by (her) ancestors.''[3]

That was fifty years ago when India was nascent with sovereignty and the Capitol was a monument to an entire nation. Today, the questions of what was envisioned, what was realized, and how it was accepted and nurtured over five decades of post-colonization conjure deeper, complex dialogs. They overlay the Capitol's celebrated profile with a complex evolving compound that has taken many guises over time. Such an assessment of the Capitol is particularly relevant not only since Chandigarh has itself grown and changed physically and politically, but because the Capitol in many ways appears to be little more than an abandoned relic of a bygone era.[4] Once laden with patriotic values, it stands neither complete in its envisioned form, nor replete with its founding meanings, looming between the Nehruvian-Corbusian vision that gave it birth and the socio-political vicissitudes of post-colonial India that nurtured it.

Journal of Architectural Education,
pp. 99–112 © 2011 ACSA

1. Model of Chandigarh showing Capitol as ''head.'' © 2010 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris/F.L.C. (Photo by author).

The Capitol as Envisioned

If Chandigarh was a ''democratic city,'' why did Le Corbusier detach the administrative center away from it? Why did he not for instance locate it within the heart of Sector 17 where he placed the commercial core? Swiss architectural historian Stanislaus von Moos had suggested that the Capitol was Le Corbusier's ''Indian answer to the Capitol of New Delhi….his tribute to the work of Lutyens and Baker.[5] ''Whether one agrees or not, Le Corbusier's regard for New Delhi is recorded and known: ''The capital of Imperial India, was built….with extreme care, great talent and real success'' he wrote, sketching the plan of Chandigarh next to that of Imperial Delhi in April 1951.[6] Le Corbusier's admiration for the very icon of the colonial legacy he had been commissioned to negate seems ironic. But Moos' observation on the commonality between the two plans—''the picturesque skylines of government buildings, the flat intervening city, and the monumental connecting axis''—holds true. The Capitol's location in this sense seems imperialistic. It is symbolically closer to a monarchial polis like Jaipur or Kyoto, the Complex taking the place of the emperor's palace at its apex. It is hard to believe that Nehru, who would eventually reject Le Corbusier's proposed Governor's palace as non-democratic would accept this seemingly imperialistic location.

Further, not only was the Capitol detached, it was also rendered invisible from the city: ''The city must never be seen'' Le Corbusier wrote designing massive ''horizontal hills'' to cut off any visual contact between them.[7] Swiss architect-historian Pierre Frey has noted that the grid-based design of Chandigarh and the Capitol's distance from the residential area has a semblance to fascist forces. He bases this on one of Le Corbusier's letters to his mother written in the 1940s stating that Hitler would allow him to build the kind of city that he had always wanted to. It reveals the architect's little known unfulfilled aspiration to build a new Berlin in Germany after both Hitler and Mussolini refused to heed. Frey posits that Chandigarh was the teleological end of Le Corbusier's long held ''rage to build,'' one he would try to satiate in Europe, but finally accomplish in Chandigarh.[8] In lieu of the fact that Le Corbusier chose not to do any of the housing in Chandigarh, and that all planning for the city's less-privileged was done by fellow architect Pierre Jeanneret, was the Capitol a selfishly isolated setting freed of any contextual constraints so as to be an open canvas for his artistic whims?

Australian architect and academic Antony Moulis in turn has speculated on Chandigarh and its Capitol through one of Le Corbusier's previously unknown drawings dated September 17, 1950. Six months before Le Corbusier committed the master plan of Chandigarh to paper, he had sketched a city plan for Adelaide, South Australia, that makes an intriguing companion to Chandigarh's: Both are drawn as autonomous rectilinear grids with the major civic buildings located on the northern edge; both feature a city surrounded by open space never to be built upon.[9] While there are no records to verify the influence of this un-realized Adelaide plan on Chandigarh, their similarity does suggest that the Capitol as a ''head'' was hardly unique to India. In fact Meyer's original Garden City plan for Chandigarh too had the administrative center located at the head of the city, and Le Corbusier appears to have simply retained the basic concepts of this predecessor. The Capitol's location as such is less convincing as an imperialistic or fascist move and more as a translation of Le Corbusier's Ville Radieuse plan (1931) that shows a hierarchical zoning from north to south, beginning with the government and office uses on top, housing in the middle, and industry at the bottom.[10]

Another interpretation of the Capitol's vision has come from Vikramaditya Prakash, the son of one of the nine Indian architects who worked with

2. Diagram showing the location of the Capitol between the new city and the village of Kansal (drawing by author).

Le Corbusier on Chandigarh. In his book ''Chandigarh's Le Corbusier: The Struggle for Modernity in Post-Colonial India,'' Prakash has argued that the Capitol was located as a transitional point between the city and the village of Kansal just to the north of it. As the ultimate voice on what would stay or go, Le Corbusier had gone to great lengths to save this particular village from the seventeen that had been slated for demolition to build the city. He visited it often, admiring the ''sugar-cane……wheat……colza fields, ploughings and pastures, peasants at work, cartings, cows, oxen and bulls.[11] He doodled ideas for the Capitol surrounded by these ''eternal animals.''[12] The Capitol was placed at the top of the town, he wrote ''to take good advantage of the presence of the mountains, the hills and the agricultural life,'' to connect ''modern times to the magisterial bucolic symphony.''[13] Thus as Prakash posits ''the village was carefully designed into the composition of the Capitol'' conceived as a fulcrum between these two worlds and framed against the Himalayas[14] (Figure 2).

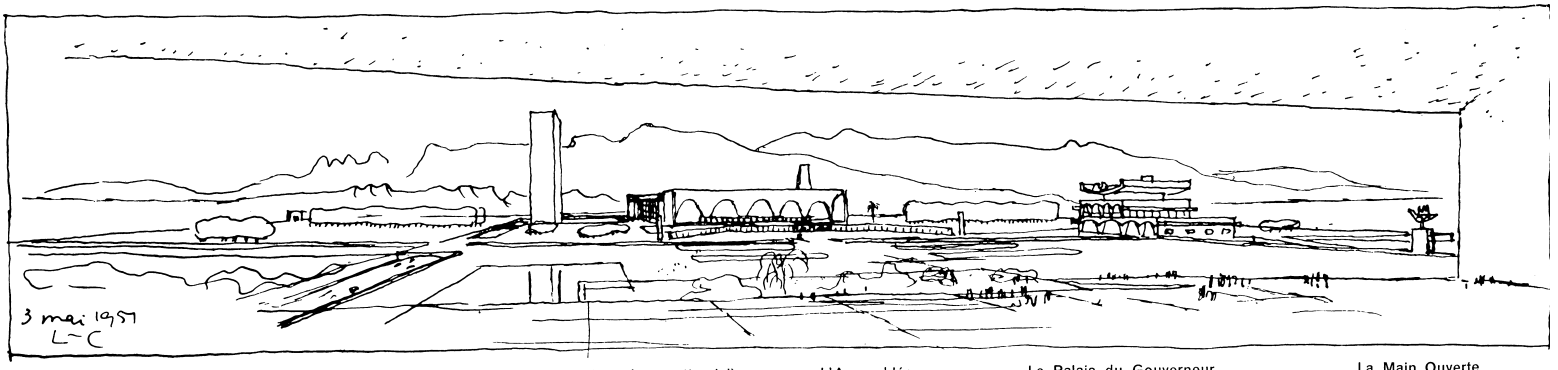
Prakash's thesis suggests that Le Corbusier's seemingly isolationist vision for the Capitol is in fact deeply democratic when understood within the macro-context in which it stands. His vision of a democratic Modernism for India was inseparable from the ''millennial activity'' of her quotidian culture.[15] His self-painted Enamel Door for the Assembly building can be read as a rubric to these intentions: the eternal sun atop a bucolic landscape of animals and birds, with the Modular Man standing among them (Figure 3). His recurrent sketches of cows, bulls, horns, and turbans was an intellectual quest to marry Modernist ideals with the semantics of India's pastoral urbanism—to express Modernism as an all-encompassing and democratic ideal. In this sense, as Prakash notes, Le Corbusier's values represent the antithesis of Lutyens' in Delhi: for him the ''profundity of Indian civilization…. lay not in its cities or historical architecture, but in the naturalistic primitivism of India's rural culture.''[16]

3. Paintings on the Enamel Door of the Assembly building. © 2010 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris/F.L.C. (photos by author).

None of Le Corbusier's sketches, however, indicate the village as part of the plan. His sketch showing Chandigarh and Delhi at the same scale appears incomplete in this regard: New Delhi is shown in the larger context of the old city of Shahjanabad, but Chandigarh is drawn as a square grid and a civic head, with nothing around it. As if supporting Nehru's enthusiasm for the Chandigarh site as being ''free from the existing encumbrances of old towns and old traditions,'' even the existing village temple dedicated to the Hindu Goddess Chandi (after which the city was named) was in no way integrated into the general master plan.[17] Prakash's thesis remains dubious on some grounds, but his reading of the Capitol is compelling, because it forces one to reconsider its immediate impression as the isolated head of a city. It suggests that there might have been other intentions and hidden interests that Le Corbusier entertained but consciously shrouded; that the Capitol was perhaps not a blindfolded fulfillment of Nehru's Modernist dictum, but to the contrary, its stealthy ''betrayal'' by a profound dialectic on India's cultural dualism that made her so complex, so special.

The Capitol as Built

On the 15th of April 1964, Le Corbusier stood in the Capitol's central space examining the completed High Court, Assembly and 240-m long Secretariat. But to the north lay an empty expanse ending only in the distant mountains where, had they been built, would have stood his proposed Governor's Place and Open Hand. Le Corbusier must have lamented that they had not broken ground, and there was little hope they would in the near future: The Governor's Palace had been rejected by Nehru as non-democratic and changed to the Museum of Knowledge; the Open Hand, despite recurrent persuasions had been evaded by Nehru for its tarnished political associations with the Bhakra Nangal project.[18] For all practical purposes Le Corbusier's vision had remained incomplete.



4. One of Le Corbusier's earliest sketches of the Capitol showing the Secretariat as a skyscraper. © 2010 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris/F.L.C.

Yet, set against the Himalayan backdrop, and carefully positioned on Modular proportions, was a dramatic concourse of three colossal and three smaller monuments: With the Secretariat slipped behind it, the Assembly and High Court stood across each other like heroes on a gigantic proscenium, with the Tower of Shadows, the Geometrical Hill, and the Monument to the Marytr as smaller players around them. As Kenneth Frampton observed, these monuments were not interrelated ''by the configuration of site, but rather by abstract sight lines, receding across vast distances…..whose only limits seemed to lie with the mountains on the horizon.''[19] Together they centered on the Esplanade—a 440-m long barren expanse of gray concrete stretching between them.

Why did Le Corbusier envision this Esplanade? What did he seek to embody through it? It is difficult to ascertain answers through the unfinished Capitol, but a number of Le Corbusier's sketches provide valuable clues in this regard. The Esplanade as an idea had remained rather consistent from start to end. Le Corbusier's earliest sketch of the Capitol from March 3, 1951—a panorama from what would today be the southern end of the High Court—shows an expansive space fronting the earliest versions of the Assembly and the Governor's palace when the Secretariat was being conceived as a skyscraper (Figure 4). Impressions of a few random trees and people appear on a seemingly infinite horizontal plain with nothing but the distant mountains to contain it. Two years later his long elevations for the Capitol's buildings show a sectional profile for the Esplanade with no landscape or people. A later sketch of the Assembly, drawn in 1955 shows the building in significant detail with little to nothing within the space around it. The final plan for the Capitol dated August 2, 1956 shows trees but only along the road behind the Secretariat, the only other identifiable landscape features being the earth mounts around the buildings, the dotted lawns, the gray pools and the checkered garden behind the Governor's Palace (Figure 5). It is difficult to imagine that Le Corbusier who never failed to draw the Himalayas would have forgotten to depict his Esplanade in detail. Conclusively, it was an unabashedly naked civic-scape with nothing to disturb the purity of his visual composition.

Le Corbusier's intrigue with the regional geography suggests a plausible explanation to this austerity. The Esplanade can be read as the third of the dramatic open spaces within and around the Capitol, the other two being the fields to the north, and the Sukhna Lake to the east. ''Moving between the space between the lake and the Capitol…..I discover Asiatic Space'' he wrote.[20] He designed the lake's Yacht Club three meters below the ground with a simple concrete colonnade along the shore to ensure that nothing would block the view of the Capitol and mountains.[21] Invested in this kinship between the macro-environment and his new world, it is possible that Le Corbusier might have conceived of the Esplanade as a metaphorical extension of the natural landscape, beyond any identifiable precedent of plaza, park, *maidan* or *chowk*.

The Esplanade, however, was meant to be a pedestrian world. Le Corbusier had sunk all the rear parking lots five meters below this elevated plane cutting off all visual connection between them. He had designed the Depth of Consideration beneath the Open Hand as an intimate sunken plaza for public debates and discussions, and the Tower of Shadows as a pavilion for contemplation. He had also designed—as seen in his sketches of the Governor's palace—a series of sculptural basins and water courts cut into the earth, with ramps and sculptures. These declivities hardly visible at ground level were best read from the roofs of the Governor's Palace and Secretariat, and the summit of the Monument to the Martyr (Figure 6). Had all this been realized, the Esplanade, with nothing to visually break its ground plane would have juxtaposed two scales: the expansive horizontal plane as a dialog with the mountains, and the intimate sunken moments measured against the human.

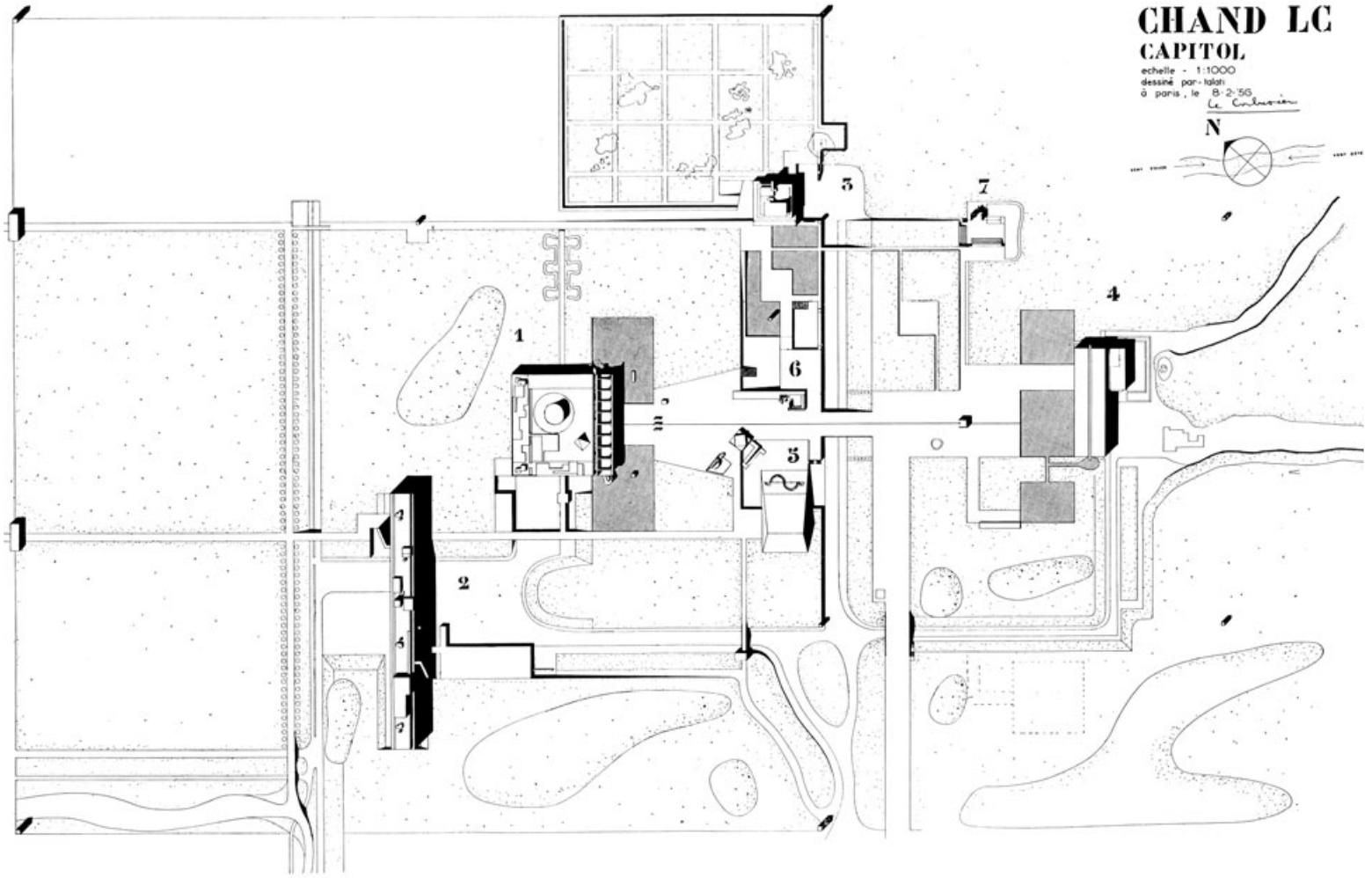
But as built, the Esplanade bears no easy explanation. Why did Le Corbusier relentlessly pave the entire 440-m expanse in hard concrete? Despite his observation that ''Indian people use their legs'' and his conviction that ''at Chandigarh, people will walk without automobile and New York's fifth avenue….will be grotesque,'' did he truly expect a pedestrian to walk twenty minutes from the Secretariat to the High Court across this barren landscape in the hot Punjabi climate?[22] The Capitol's central space is difficult to justify on pragmatic grounds. Its mega-scale invites no human association; its unapologetic hardscape serves no practical purpose; and its presence for civic ritual is discouraged through its distance and detachment from the city. For all its polemical justification, the Esplanade seems self-centered and myopic, remaining the Capitol's most questionable dimension.

With Nehru's death in 1964, and Le Corbusier's a year later, neither of the Capitol's visionaries lived to see their vision complete. And in 1966, with Punjab divided ethnically into Hindu and Sikh districts, Chandigarh was designated a Union Territory, now administered by the Central Government, and serving as the administrative center for both the states of Punjab and Haryana. Consequently, the Assembly and Secretariat buildings were divided to cater to both states, while Chandigarh's own local government was housed in a separate building in the inner city. Barely a year old,

1 l'Assemblée
2 le Secrétariat (les Ministères)
3 le Palais du Gouverneur
4 la Haute-Cour
5 la Fosse de la Considération
6 les bassins devant le Palais du Gouverneur
7 la Main Ouverte

1 Parliament (Assembly)
2 The Secretariat
3 Governors Palace
4 Justice Court
6 The basins in front of the Governors Palace
7 The Open Hand

1 Parlamentsgebäude
2 Sekretariat (Regierungsgebäude)
3 Gouverneurs-Palast
4 Justizpalast
6 Die Wasserbecken vor dem Gouverneurs-Palast
7 Die Offene Hand



Chandigarh Parc du Capitol 55

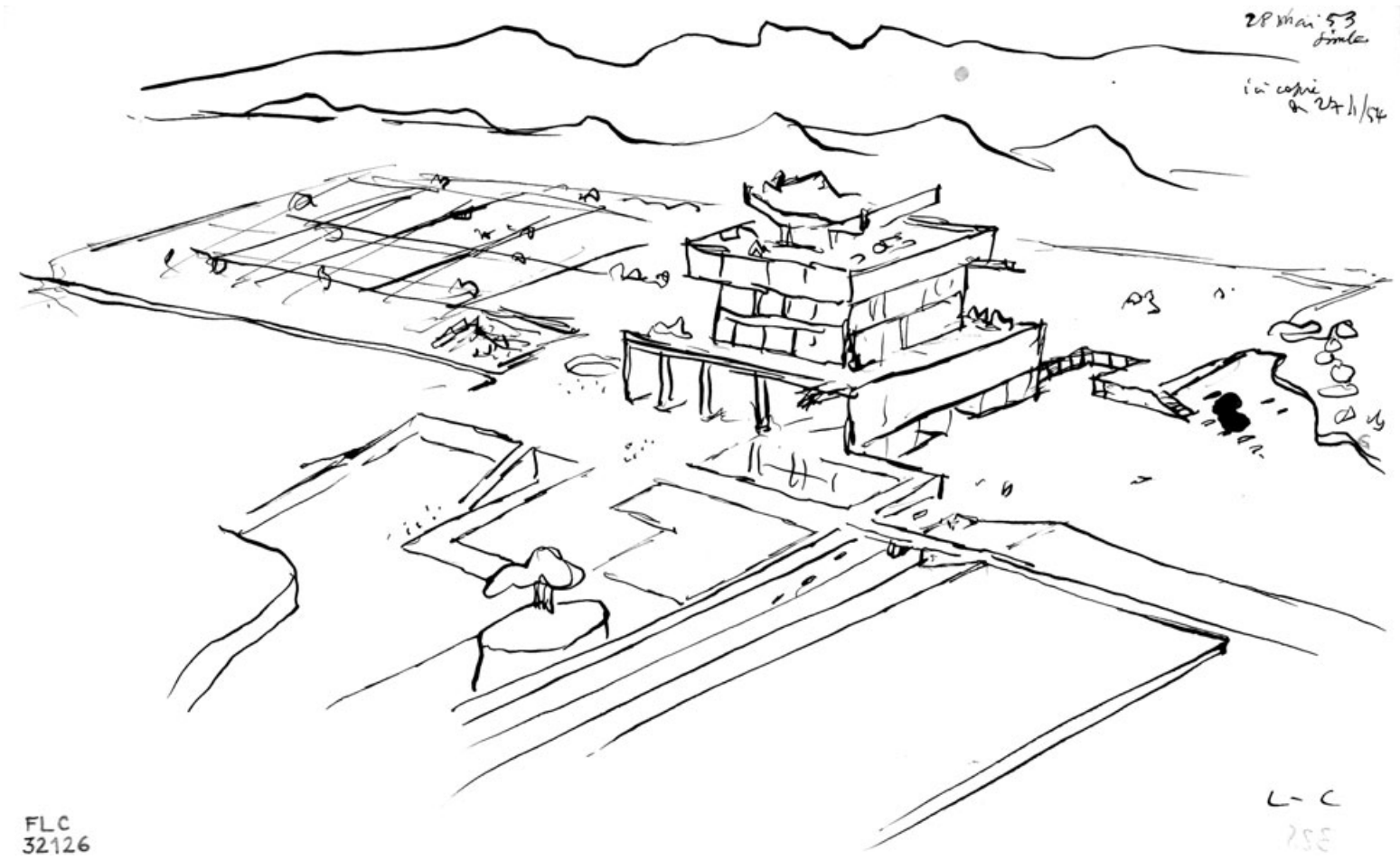
5. Final plan of capitol. © 2010 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris/F.L.C.

the infant Capitol painstakingly ''hand-crafted'' for over a decade by peasants and construction workers pouring concrete into wooden formwork with their own hands, now seemed like an unfinished utopia hastily altered and adapted for a new political era.

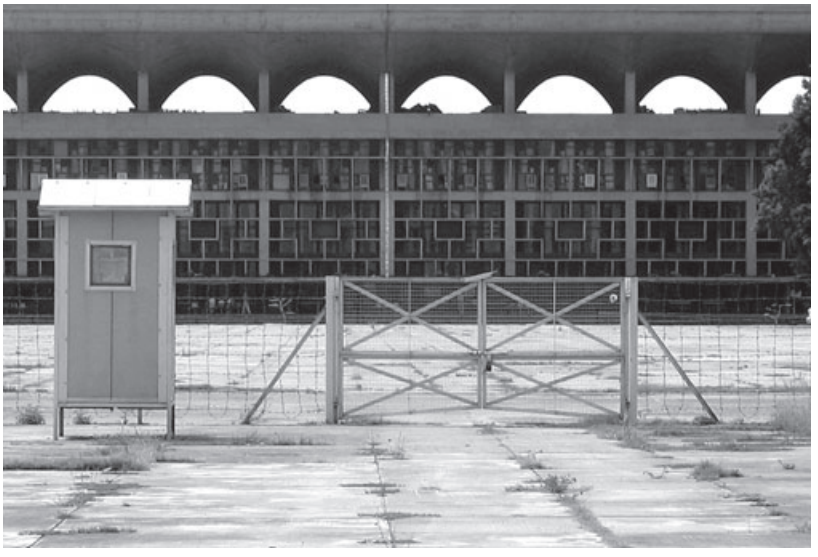
But the world continued to see it through other eyes. In his *Oeuvre Complete* in 1957 Le Corbusier had showcased the emerging Capitol through dramatic photographs of its construction process—the Secretariat being poured against the distant backdrop of the completed High Court, workers lined up on bamboo scaffolds, and veiled women carrying loads on their heads.[23] For all its compromised dimensions, the Capitol as seen through the *Oeuvre's* pages remained the crowning achievement of both Le Corbusier and India: The building of the Capitol as much as the complex itself represented a monumentalization of India's indigene, a conciliation between the timelessness of her vernacular with the promise of her new.

The Capitol Today

Circa 1985: While the building of the Open Hand monument and its sunken gathering space, the Depth of Consideration sought to further complete the Capitol's original vision some three decades after their initial proposal, the tense socio-political



6. Le Corbusier's sketch of un-built Governor's Palace. © 2010 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris/F.L.C.

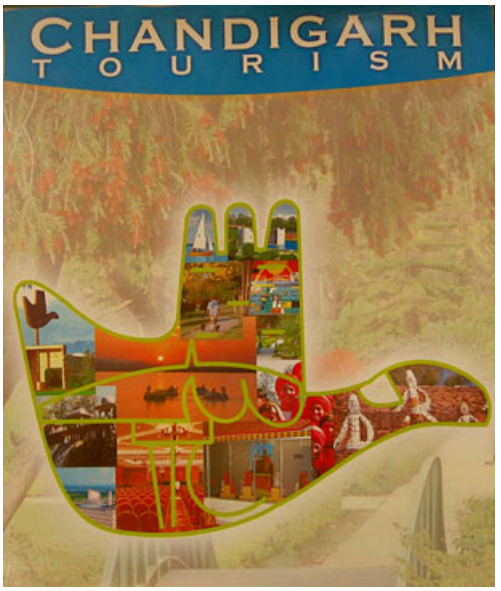


7. The High Court behind fences and guard-posts as seen from the center of the Esplanade, circa 2008. © 2010 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris/F.L.C. (photo by author).

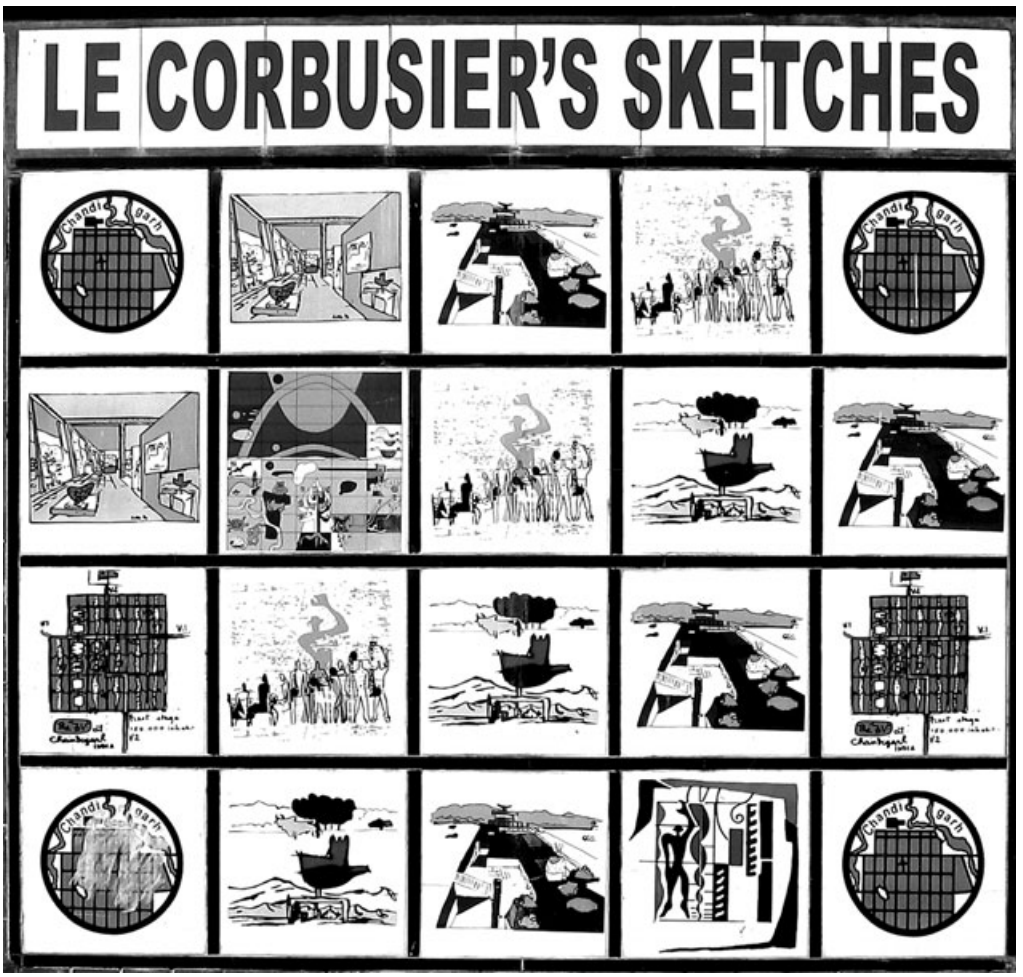
8. Clothes hung to dry on the barbed wires surrounding the Assembly building. © 2010 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris/F.L.C. (photo by author).

9. View of Capitol from upper levels of the Secretariat, circa 2008. © 2010 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris/F.L.C. (photo by author).

10. August 15, 2010 national anthem performance at the Open Hand. © 2010 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris/F.L.C. (Photo by Gurpreet Singh, AugustKranti).



11. Open Hand as city symbol. © 2010 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris/F.L.C. (photo by author).



12. Mural of Le Corbusier's Chandigarh sketches embossed on tiles on a restaurant wall near Sukhna Lake. © 2010 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris/F.L.C. (photo by author).

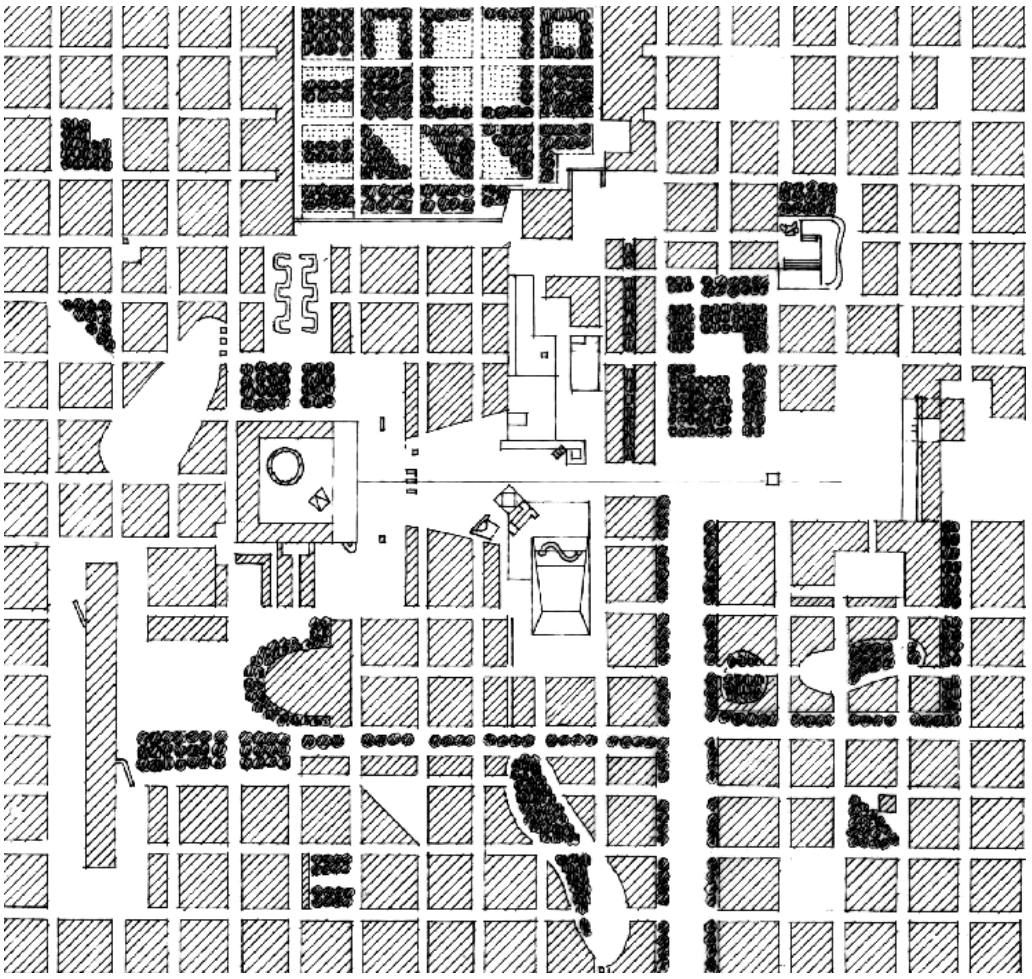
milieu surrounding this event suggested the contrary. Chandigarh was being haunted by the paranoia of Sikh terrorists killing people at will. On June 3, 1984 Prime Minister Indira Gandhi had ordered a military attack on the Golden Temple in Amritsar—the holiest of Sikh shrines—killing hundreds of Sikh terrorists who had amassed weapons within, and eventually leading to her assassinationon October 31 that same year.[24] With everything from city to state wearing a somber garb, emergency security measures were implemented to safeguard the administrative center: barbed wire fences with guard-posts, gates and gun-men surrounded the major buildings. Security was tightened. Entry to the Capitol though not totally restricted now seemed far more precarious than ever before. Le Corbusier's vision would never be the same again.

Today, in 2010, guard posts, gates and barbed wires still interrupt the view of the Enamel Door from the Esplanade. Trees growing randomly around the Assembly blocking the same vista of the Secretariat that not so long ago seemed like a carefully conceived visual composition. Secured entry happens from the rear parking lots, which also becomes the setting for hawkers and commerce. Thus, except as a space to admire the buildings, the Esplanade stays largely empty (even on Independence Day, with the parades happening instead in the *maidan* near Sector 17) occupied only by a few administrative cars that sheepishly park themselves under the trees at its fringes. Nothing but weeds possess the ill-maintained expansive concrete hardscape. The Assembly's pools stay full, sometimes as a mire of moss and mosquitoes; the High Court is often empty. The smaller monuments appear like abandoned props, while the Open Hand stands isolated, its sunken plaza conceived for public debate perpetually silent and brooding. Seen from the Esplanade, the Capitol seems like an empty proscenium whose performers have long disappeared (Figures 7 and 8).

From atop the Secretariat, however, the Capitol appears different. A thick green jungle shrouds Le Corbusier's uninterrupted plain of the fifties. The Assembly and High Court nestle in this green blanket like ancient temples of a lost civilization with the Open Hand and the Geometrical Hill like altars of an antediluvian cult. While the dramatic juxtaposition of nature and aging concrete does indeed recall William Curtis' poetic of the Capitol as a ''a colossal grave, a dignified ruin,'' one wonders what Le Corbusier would have thought of this seemingly lost world entombing the values of another time (Figure 9).[25]

Not that no-one visits this isolated northern part of the city. They do—in fact in droves. They just do not come to the Capitol. Instead, they go next door to the fantastic world of Nek Chand's Rock Garden.[26] People of all ages, from all over, journey through its tenuous labyrinth with birds, beasts and figurines made of everything from broken bulbs and lavatory flushes to beer bottles. The garden is something everyone happily associates with. It boasts a public magnetism the forlorn Capitol can only aspire to.

Consequently, for years now, the only consistent inhabitants of the Capitol—besides the diurnal political menagerie, sanitation department workers and thrash collectors—have been the



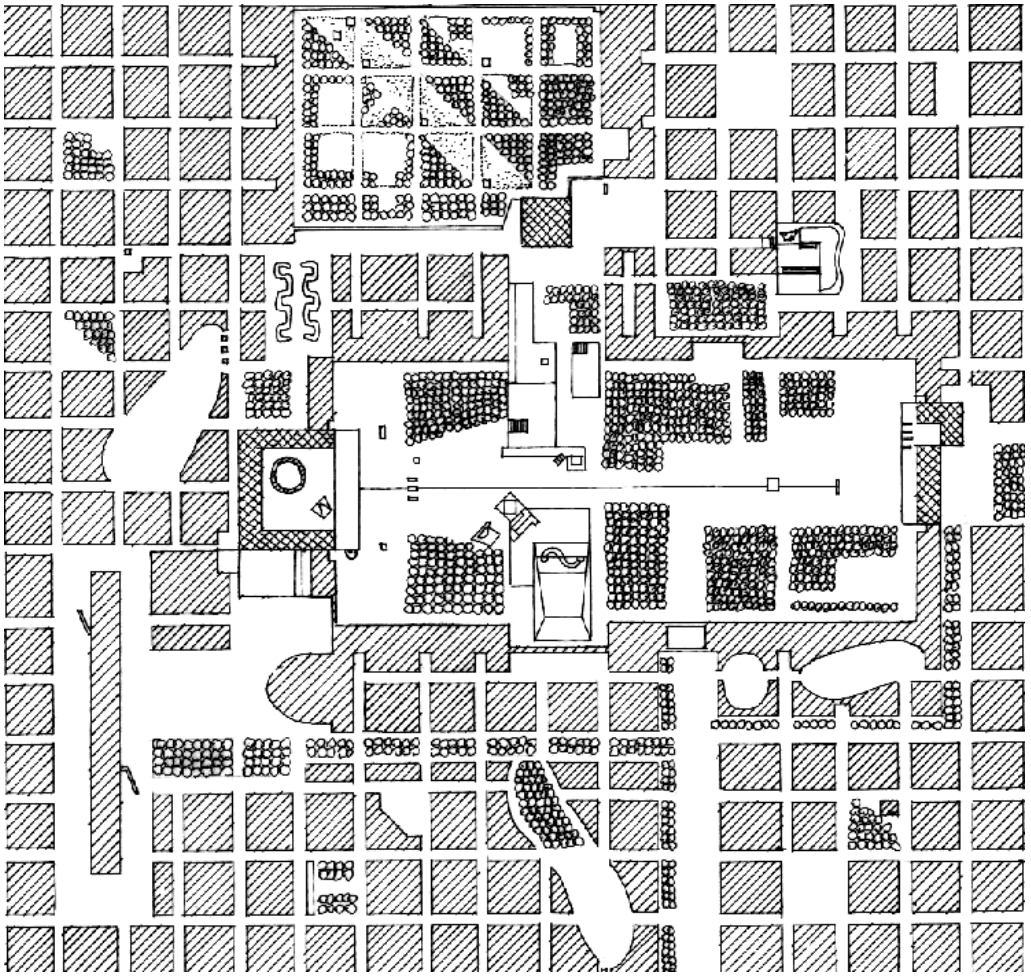
13. Hypothetical schemes for the Capitol by Rodrigo Perez de Arce (Courtesy: Rodrigo Perez de Arce).

villagers of Kansal. They have regularly visited the Complex without any invitation or permission—to wash, bathe, and carry home water for cooking—possessing it as their own. The lawns surrounding the deserted Open Hand have become their cricket fields and hang outs. The photographs of villagers washing clothes and buffaloes in the Assembly's pools are not a myth; like the sacred temple tanks of India, water again has become the physical and spiritual link between a center and a village.

That the thriving city and its forlorn Capitol have lost their umbilical cord has not gone unnoticed. Since its founding in 2005 *Hum Log* (literally ''We the People''), a local non-government organization (NGO) has sought to generate a wave of citizen activism through organized campaigns for the cause of the city. The ''Free the Open Hand Campaign'' organized street theater, debates and conferences at the monument to make it accessible to the public. Thanks to such efforts, since January 2010, the Chandigarh government has lifted the ban on social gatherings at the Open Hand allowing it to be open to citizens daily between 10:30 and 3:30 (tourists and other outsiders must still apply to the city's administration for permission to visit). On August 15, 2010, scores of residents led by the same initiative, in an effort to highlight the Capitol's restricted access, sang the national anthem at the Open Hand to mark India's Independence Day (Figure 10). The administration had denied permission for this event citing security curbs, but the organizers filed a suit in the High Court obtaining permission to sing the anthem following the scheduled conclusion of the judges' get-together. In the words of Gaurav Chhabra, Hum Log's Founder-Director, the fight to free the Open Hand is not just about physical encroachment of the monument but also about freeing ''the encroachment made by the 'state' on the minds of people.''[27] Some two decades since its fortification, the question of who ''owns'' the Capitol has taken center-stage.

The national anthem performance at the Open Hand represents a watershed moment in the Capitol's recent history. As a performance of protest, it is not simply a mode of political expression, but also an indication of democratic success. It has marked the beginnings of new meanings and identities for the Capitol, making it a site of contestation, re-definition, and reconstruction. More significantly, this performance is also a wake-up call to the lethargy of the Chandigarh citizenry that have long since giving up on the Capitol. As such, the Open Hand seems so appropriate as the center of all the action, since it is today the only link between the thriving polis and its empty center—not through its intended symbolism of being ''Open to receive, Open to Give,'' but through its ubiquitous scattering as a two-dimensional imprint throughout the city[28] (Figure 11). From tourist hoardings and garbage bins to pamphlets and driver's licenses, it is the city's official symbol, though few know or even care about its relevance then, versus now.

The fortified Capitol brooding around the contested epicenter of the Open Hand is both a helpless victim of unpredictable political circumstances as well as a mirror reflecting the darker political colors of post-colonial India. Even as Le Corbusier's portrait still hangs in the Assembly building with the words ''Le Corbusier – The Great Architect,'' and his sketches embossed on glazed tiles decorate building walls, the Capitol oscillates between its veneration or denigration as the ''Corbusian ruin,'' depending on who is looking (Figure 12). But ironically it is hardly known to the wider world for what it has truly become. It continues to be projected in architecture and planning volumes as that original Corbusian figment. Its photographs are either from the early fifties, before any of this had happened, or they are carefully cropped to erase the barbed wires, gateposts, and weeds, to showcase only the



14. Hypothetical schemes for the Capitol by Rodrigo Perez de Arce (Courtesy: Rodrigo Perez de Arce).

sculptural purity of the buildings—as if the only thing that matters is Le Corbusier's original vision, not its legacy.

The Capitol as It May Be

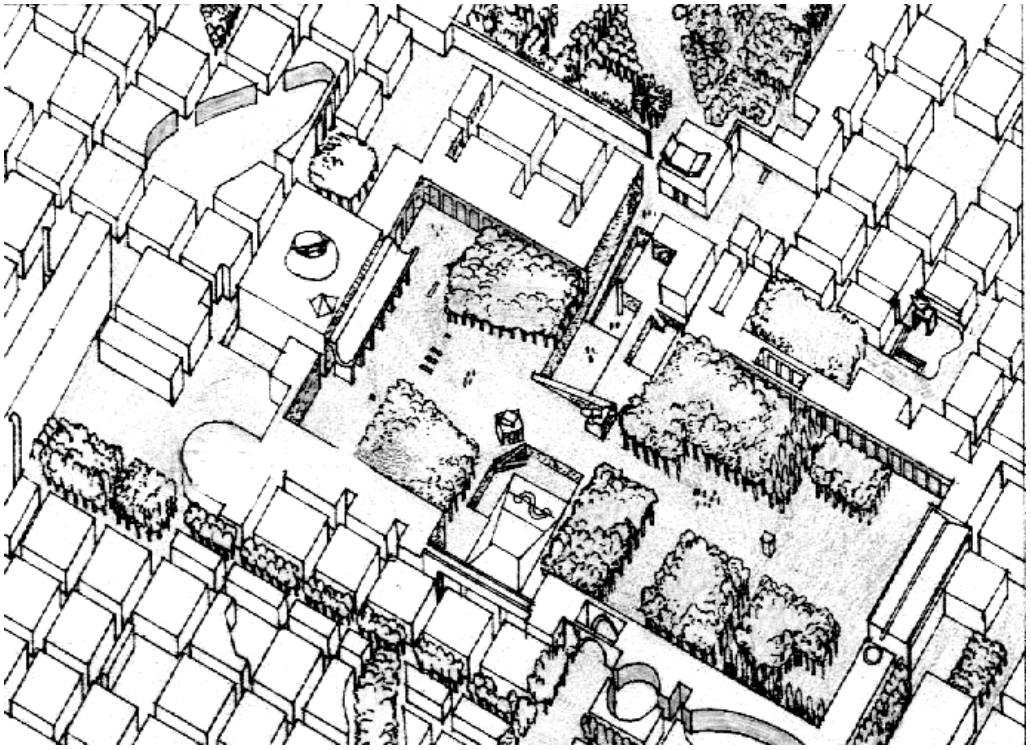
For a few days in January 1999, Le Corbusier's Capitol appeared somewhat complete. To celebrate Chandigarh's 50th anniversary, a distinguished group of international architects had gathered in the Complex, and a life-size cloth image of the unbuilt Museum of Knowledge (originally Governor's Palace) had been erected where originally envisioned. Standing in the Esplanade one could see the inverted parasol animating the northern skyline along with the Open Hand. Meanwhile, the conference discussions produced some provocative insights on the Capitol. The Australian architect Lawrence Nield posited that considering the Indian (and Punjabi) love for the sport, perhaps a cricket stadium rather than the Museum might be a more appropriate addition to the Capitol given the current cultural context.[29] These two ideas—the simulacra and the stadium—taken together suggest a complex rhetoric surrounding the Capitol's future.

The simulacra specifically created for the celebration was a tribute to the Capitol and its designer by an entire architectural generation that inevitably felt indebted to them. For those who had witnessed its making as young architects in the fifties, the Capitol was not simply a whiff of nostalgia, but the very foundations of their faith in the power of architecture. Emotional and intellectual, the simulacra was an embodiment of their unfulfilled desire to see the Capitol complete, to ''authenticate'' their hero's vision that had for had decades remained languishing.

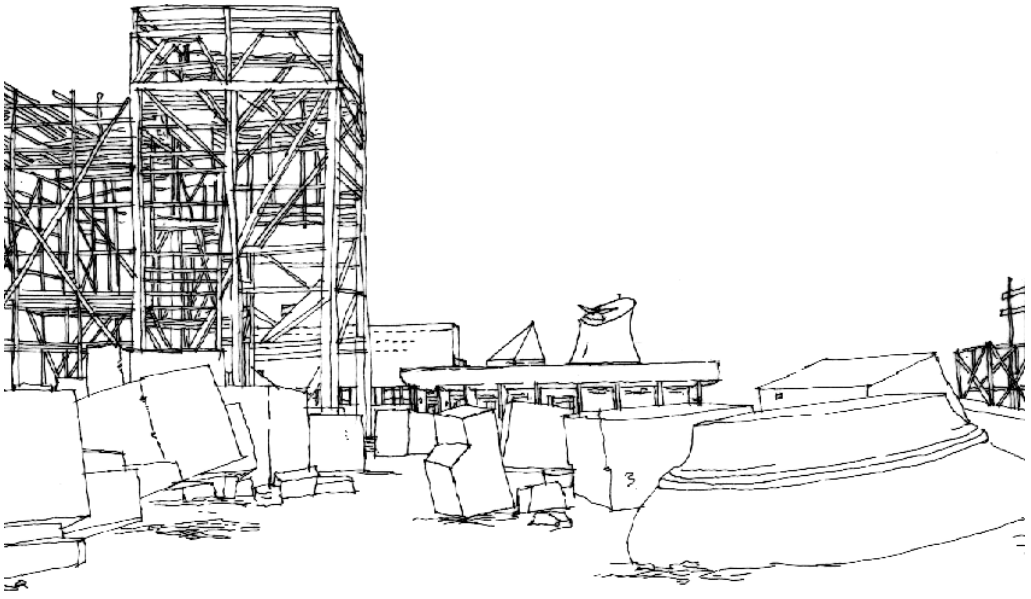
The suggestion to replace the Museum of Knowledge with a cricket stadium was by contrast, a pragmatic argument. It sought to re-magnetize the Capitol as a public, democratic place; to re-invigorate the populist indifference toward this failed urban resource; to update it for a post-industrial Indian generation that has transcended the ''Corbusian Cult'' in much the same way as their predecessors had the pessimistic perception of colonialism. For this new generation, the Capitol's original values are only as ambiguous now as they were relevant fifty years ago. Indeed, if a post-colonial generation could shed the tyrannical image of the Viceroy's Palace (now the Indian President's official residence), and accept it as an irrevocable legacy of which they were part, why could not their post-industrial progeny choose to read the Capitol not through its original nationalistic intentions, but its current vicissitudes of which they were part?

Interestingly, a far more radical notion had been suggested for the Capitol's transformation some three decades earlier. As part of a series of hypothetical re-urbanizations for prominent Modernist urban centers, the Chilean architect Rodrigo Perez de Arce had drawn up a scheme for the Capitol. He had superimposed a humane urban grid over the entire Complex, in-filling the vast open spaces with cohesive fabric, and overlaying Le Corbusier's expansive scheme with a completely new set of relationships among the buildings. With the original Jan Marg (the main southern entry) terminating into a garden and the Esplanade narrowed into a visual corridor, the Capitol's monuments now appeared intimately engaged with a city, transforming its image from a sequestered utopia, to a place for habitation (Figures 13–17).

Be that as it may, the distinguished group of architects gathered at the Chandigarh conference concluded among other things that Le Corbusier's original design for the Governor's Palace was far more appealing that its reincarnation as the Museum of Knowledge. And by December 2007, a year after Chandigarh officials submitted a bid to UNESCO's Paris-based headquarters to make the city a World Heritage site; it was made public that the Chandigarh Administration would ''set up'' the Museum of Knowledge per the original design of



15. Hypothetical schemes for the Capitol by Rodrigo Perez de Arce (Courtesy: Rodrigo Perez de Arce).



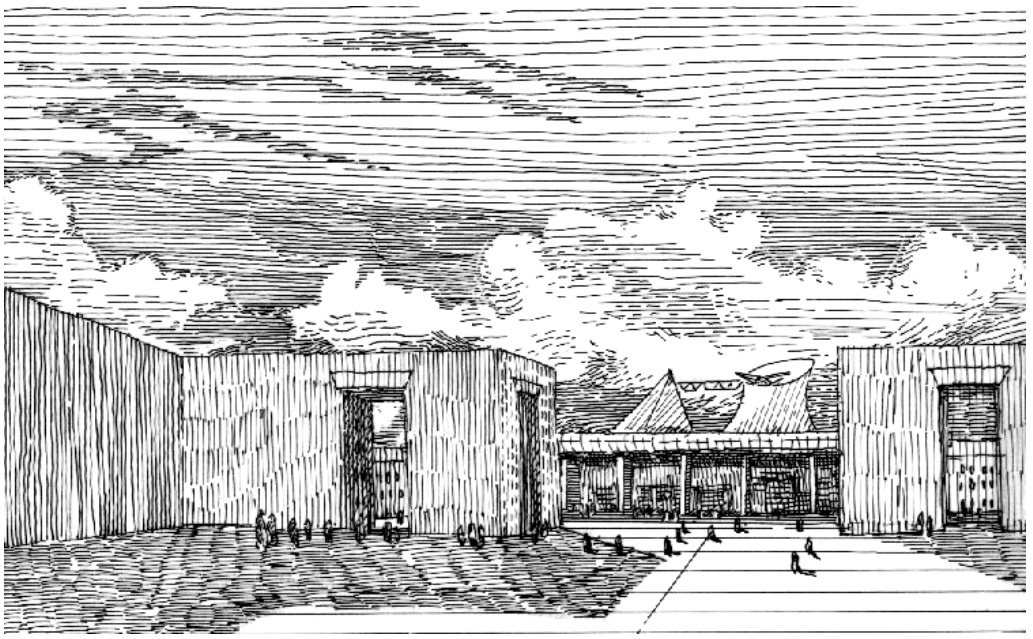
16. Hypothetical renderings of the Capitol by Rodrigo Perez de Arce (Courtesy: Rodrigo Perez de Arce).

the Governor's Palace, at the same location as initially planned.[30]

Who defines authenticity? If the construction of the Museum of Knowledge in the form of the Governor's Palace can be an acceptable ''authentication'' of Le Corbusier's original vision, why can Arce's scheme not be read as the dramatic transformation of the village of Kansal, simultaneously reinforcing the Capitol's original and eventual destiny as a place of democracy and participation? If the Capitol's future can be the intellectual domain of franchised elite contemplating its potential as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, why can it not be the inhabited terrain of the people who arguably ''own'' it?

Perhaps this is the Capitol's missing dimension: For all its democratic innuendos, it has evolved through anything but a democratic process. In fact were not its origins ''non-democratic'' to begin with? As Indian architect Romi Khosla suggested, the making of Chandigarh was in a sense an ''Imperial Plan'' not too dissimilar from that of New Delhi.[31] Despite their protest, twenty-four villages and nine thousand residents were displaced by a Euclidean plan. Nehru had the powers of the Viceroy and his dictum for an unabashed Modernity, however, well intentioned, was never subjected to the litmus test of the Indian public. Visionary yet autocratic, his conviction that an informed elite could pave the path to India's future was in this sense an echo of its colonial past, and the germ of the Capitol's continuing legacy.

Envisioned by a great leader, conceived by a great architect, and thrust upon the infant consciousness of a born-again nation, the Capitol then remains an unfinished utopia whose noble aspirations and architectural prowess have not been able to surpass the socio-political vagaries of post-colonial India. An elusive place whose emerging guises remain shrouded beneath an antiquated Corbusian veil, it affirms that architecture, however, masterful, is but a pawn in the complex socio-political game of city-making. Monumentality and civic pride are eventually not architectural but socio-political phenomena, and the intentions of monuments can become confused even at their inception, and certainly during their reception—at once an artistic, political, and anthropological problem. While as visionary aspirations are important, the expectations and circumstances of those who



17. Hypothetical renderings of the Capitol by Rodrigo Perez de Arce (Courtesy: Rodrigo Perez de Arce).

''own,'' adopt and appropriate them are even more critical to their nurturing. Thus, while the Capitol's guise from a national monument to a local ''ruin'' might tell one part of a story, the three above-mentioned scenarios might suggest another, for they can also be read sequentially as a fictitious narrative on the Capitol's re-transformation from a place of memory to one of participation. In this sense, the Capitol need not be seen as a relic, but as the seed of a larger evolving vision that will be tested, appropriated, and completed by generations to come. Whether or not it becomes a World Heritage Site, what Chandigarh's Capitol needs desperately is an honest reassessment of its multifarious guises and their complex cultural narrative, an unapologetic stripping of its Corbusian veils, and an unbiased re-examination of its post-colonial scars as the true dimensions of its evolving identity.

Notes

1. Nehru intended to have Chandigarh designed by an Indian, but due to the lack of Indian designers immediately after the colonial rule, the administrators settled for the American planner Albert Meyer, who had been appointed by Nehru in August 1947 as the ''Planning Advisor to the Government of Uttar Pradesh.'' Meyer contracted Polish-born architect Matthew Nowicki to visualize the architecture. Meyer's Garden City plan was a zoned, softened grid of residential superblocks or ''villages'' organized around two axial routes bordered by linear parks and a central business district. Each unit had a central green dotted with schools and public amenities and a bazaar street. The administrative center was located at the head of the city. Le Corbusier's plan retained the basic concepts of the Meyer plan, while transforming them formally.
2. Le Corbusier's contract stated his role was to ''advice and assist'' in among other things the development and detailing of the master plan, preparation of the principal buildings, determination of the general style of architecture, landscaping of public areas, and the architectural treatment of important urban features such as streets, squares, gardens, and water features. Le Corbusier had chosen not to do any of the housing in Chandigarh, and consented on visiting India twice a year, for a month each.
3. Jawarharlal Nehru spoke to the Indian Institute of Engineers in 1959 noting Chandigarh as an ''experiment'' he welcomed and liked because ''it was not being tied down to what has been done before by our forefathers and the like.'' For complete quote see Jawaharlal Nehru, ''Mr. Nehru on Architecture,'' in *Urban and Rural Planning Thought* 2.2, April 1959, p. 49.
4. Originally planned for 500,000 residents, Chandigarh is today home to over 1.1 million people, including over 300,000 slum dwellers.
5. See Stanislaus Von Moos, *Le Corbusier, Elements of a Synthesis* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), p. 259.
6. Ibid.
7. From Le Corbusier's Chandigarh sketchbook 4#80. In the earliest stages in 1951. Le Corbusier envisioned the Capitol to visually dominate the city; thus the Secretariat was conceived of as a skyscraper. This proposal was turned down by the bureaucrats, and the Secretariat became a horizontal building. After numerous studies in positioning the long Secretariat, by March 1952, he started designing dunes to cut the city off visually from the Capitol.
8. These comments were made by Pierre Fray while talking to Newsline at the Chandigarh College of Architecture in 2005. For more on this see ''Corbusier Snubbed by Hitler, Blessed by Nehru'' published in *http://wadias.in/site/arzan/blog/corbusier-snubbed-by-hitler-blessed-by-nehru/*
9. For more on this see Anthony Moulis, ''Transcribing the Contemporary City: Le Corbusier, Adelaide, and Chandigarh'' in Stephen Loo and Katharine Bartsch, eds, *Panorama to Paradise: Scopic Regimes in Architectural and Urban History and Theory: XXIVth Annual Conference of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand*, [Available CD-Rom] (Adelaide: 2007).
10. For more on Ville Radieuse, see Kenneth Frampton ''Le Corbusier and the Ville Radieuse,'' in *Modern Architecture: A Critical History*, 3rd ed. (New York: Thames & Hudson Inc., 1992), pp. 178–85.
11. See Le Corbusier, ''The Master Plan,'' *Marg* 15 (1961): 10.1.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Vikramaditya Prakash, *Chandigarh's Le Corbusier: The Struggle for Modernity in Post-colonial India* (University of Washington Press, 2002), p. 80.
15. See Le Corbusier, ''The Master Plan,'' *Marg* 15 (1961): 10.1.
16. See Vikramaditya Prakash, *Chandigarh's Le Corbusier,* p. 80.
17. See Ravi Kalia, *Chandigarh: The Making of an Indian City* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 10–12.
18. In the early 1950's at Nehru's behest to propose an esthetic plan for the ambitious Bhakra Nangal hydroelectric dam project, Le Corbusier had proposed another Open Hand atop the dam. Part of the project objectives was to expand agricultural land through new irrigation canals from the main reservoir to Punjab's outlying areas. While the canals did benefit the central and southern regions, their raised banks in the central region caused flooding during the rains causing significant loss of agricultural land, and generating political unrest, tarnishing the reputation of the dam. For an elaboration of this episode see Vikramaditya Prakash, *Chandigarh's Le Corbusier*, pp. 139–43.
19. See Kenneth Frampton, ''Le Corbusier and the monumentalization of the vernacular 1930–1960,'' in *Modern Architecture: A Critical History*, 3rd ed. (New York: Thames & Hudson Inc., 1992), p. 230.
20. From Le Corbusier's Chandigarh sketchbook 4# 13.
21. For more on this see Deborah Gans, *The Le Corbusier Guide* (Revised Edition) (Princeton Architectural Press), pp. 240–41.
22. This is a quote from Le Corbusier's sketchbook 2#362–363. For expanded version of the quote see Vickramaditya Prakash, *Chandigarh's Le Corbusier: The Struggle for Modernity in Post-colonial India* (University of Washington Press, 2002), p. 46.
23. See Le Corbusier, *Oeuvre Complete 1957–1965*, pp. 61–87. Vickramaditya Prakash has elaborated on this point in *Chandigarh's Le Corbusier*, pp. 84–85.
24. While the causes of Punjab's 1980s terrorist scene are complex, a key factor was the desire of many Punjab Sikhs for greater autonomy and the Indian government's refusal to relinquish control. In the early 1980s, after years of protracted negotiation between Sikh political leaders and the central government, a number of Sikhs, mainly followers of Saint Bhindranwale, a fundamentalist Sikh preacher—began to adopt more violent tactics. A crucial precipitating factor was Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's dismissal of Punjab's elected state legislature in 1980, which for the first time had been under control of a leading Sikh political party, Akali Dal. When state elections were held in May of that year, Gandhi's Congress Party gained power by a small majority. Extremist Sikhs subsequently grew bolder in confronting the government with a marked increase in random attacks on civilians in markets and public places.
25. See William Curtis, *Modern Architecture Since 1900*, p. 279. Curtis uses the words ''colossal grave, and dignified ruin'' to express the effect of the ''rugged concrete'' of the Capitols buildings to which ''the searing climate soon added its own patina.''

26. Nek Chand was a Road-Inspector in the establishment of the Chandigarh Chief Engineer. He scavenged discarded debris from Chandigarh's construction, and secretly began to build a garden in a jungle clearing violating both local construction regulation and Le Corbusier's master plan for the new city. It was not until 1976, after several years of quiet work and struggle that the garden was eventually recognized as a masterpiece and formally opened to the public.

27. Dr. Gaurav Chhabra in an e-mail correspondence with author dated August 23, 2010.

28. See Le Corbusier, ''The Master Plan,'' *Marg* 15 (1961): 10.1. He called the Open Hand a symbol of the ethics of the Second Machine Age: ''open to receive, open to give.'' For an elaboration on the evolution and semantics of the Open Hand see Prakash Vikramaditya, *Chandigarh's Le Corbusier*, pp. 125–40.

29. See Lawrence Nield, ''Portraits of Josephine and the Smile of Eve in paradise,'' in Thakar Jaspreet, ed., *Celebrating Chandigarh* (Mapin Publishing, 2002), pp. 185–92.

30. For more on this announcement, see ''Chandigarh to get Museum of Knowledge,'' *Punjab Newsline* (December 19, 2007), http://punjabnewsline.com

31. See Khosla Romi, ''Process,'' in Thakar Jaspreet, ed., *Celebrating Chandigarh* (Mapin Publishing, 2002), p. 69.