

CHANDIGARH: Le Corbusier and the new city in the Chilean culture, 1951-1957

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1. It is well known that, between 1950 and 1958, Le Corbusier planned and developed the city of Chandigarh, capital of the Punjab, in India. The plan was to create, from scratch, the new capital for a provincial state set in the territorial division established in post independence India in 1947 (the old capital of the Punjab, Lahore, had become part of Pakistan). It is also known that he developed the architecture for the Capitol, which characterizes de city.

It is less known that Le Corbusier developed the plan based on a previous one done by Albert Mayer, of the Mayer, Whittlesey and Glass company in New York, who had been a military officer stationed in India during the Second World War (Sarin, 1982). Towards December 1949, Mayer had started the planning work for a city of 150.000 inhabitants with a projection of 500.000 in the future. It was specified in the contract that there would be a complex called Capitol, which would have a building for the Provincial Assembly, the Governor's Palace and the

Supreme Court of Justice. The city would have residential areas, parks, avenues, groups of buildings and, among them, an area assigned to the university. Besides, at the beginning of 1950, Nowicki, a Polish architect, joined the team for the development of the architectural projects (Munford, 1954). The Indian directors were P. N. Thapar, a member of the British civil service in the former colony, and P. L. Varma, the Head of engineers of the Punjab. Varma had been commissioned to the USA to study the American road construction system and urban planning and it was he who contacted Mayer and signed the contracts for the development of the work (Evenson, 1966).

Mayer's work was based on a system of "super blocks" or neighbourhood units looking for a certain identity on the scale, but the distance imposed the lack of awareness regarding forms of local development. When Nowicki died in an aviation accident, Thapar and Varma went to Europe to contract two architects without a definite architectural preference who would be able to reside in India for three consecutive years at least, in order to help setting up a local organization and train architects capable to assume the continuity of the project (Sarin, 1982). The result of this process was the contract of Le Corbusier, as a consultant, and of Pierre Jeanneret, Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew, who would live in India, as architects in charge.

2. The cities of India had maintained

a strong urban segregation between what was considered the "anglostan", an area of British garden city, and the "hindustan" – sectors overcrowded with buildings without services—, to use Digby's classification, made known in 1901 in his work Prosperous British India and the situation recognized by Nehru in his autobiography, published in 1962 (Sarin, 1982). By 1948 the Indian Board of Town Planners, most of whose members were architects, had already been established, with the purpose of having the necessary knowledge for urban planning. Together with many intellectuals and national leaders, they were searching for an expression of the new independent nation in art and architecture. Some supported a return to the mughal⁽¹⁾ style in architecture. Others advocated, in urbanism, a return to the traditional ideas of the Manasara Shilpa Shastras⁽²⁾, one of the most traditional scenarios of urban architecture and environment, dating back approximately 1,000 years (Tadgell, 1990).

But newly coined ideas were more important to represent the new nation and formed several groups to promote the values of the new society. Part of this process was an architectural publication called MARG (Modern Architecture Research Group), founded by Mulk Raj Anand, who was an expert in the problems generated by the partition produced by the independence process. Maristella Casciato (2012) has described the development of the publication and how as one of its assistant editors, she became

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acquainted with Le Corbusier's thinking after reading the 1927 English edition of "Towards an Architecture". MARG was born in an atmosphere of enthusiasm that accompanied Nehru's ideas, and it had a wide approach to Indian culture, with two objectives:

«Creating a public platform to give objects, places and ideas a story so that they could continue to flourish even after the end of the colonial period; fostering the knowledge of the Indian cultural heritage (and in more general terms, the Asian one), voicing the expressions of the collective and regional memory by a process of awareness that went through the entire nation » (Casciato, 2012, p. 37). MARG had a vanguard role; it published the plan and architecture of Chandigarh, and «was certainly the most fertile soil for nourishing the concept of planning & dreaming, more incisive every time after 1947» (Casciato, 2012, p. 39).

Eventually, the ideas adopted were those supported by Le Corbusier. The definite plan was based on the theory of the seven ways and its relationship with urban sectors, zoning criteria of modern urbanism, some of the principles of the Athens Charter of 1933 and the ideas he had developed more widely in 1945 in "The Three Human Establishments".

3. The knowledge of the urban experience that was developing in India had some repercussion in Chile³. It was particularly recognised in two publications that in the 1950s appeared in the Chilean cultural scenario: *Pro Arte* and *Pomaire* (Torrent, 2012).

Pro Arte was a magazine published between 1948 and 1956 whose objectives

were to present the ideas under debate in general culture, bring artists and cultural operators together and consolidate a public audience around the problems of the various cultural sectors. As it was a weekly publication, it showed the Chilean cultural dynamics and particularly that of Santiago. There were 181 issues in all, with regular sections such as plastic arts, music, drama and literature, with sporadic notes on architecture, cinema and ballet, complemented with other more general notes on cultural events. Its editorial team was formed by Enrique Bello Cruz as Director, Santiago del Campo, as deputy director, Sergio Montecino and Camilo Mori, both in charge of the section on plastic arts; Pedro Orthous, Agustín Siré and Etienne Frois in the drama section and Daniel Quiroga, Juan Orrego Salas and César Cecchi in the music one. The magazine was financially supported by Sergio Larraín García Moreno, Dean of the Faculty of Architecture of the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile.

Pro Arte promoted architecture topics with a strong presence of the Plastic Arts Group of the Faculty of Architecture of the University of Chile during the initial years (1948-50), and more sporadically later, publishing two special editions, one about Santiago, in 1953 and another on Latinamerican architecture, focussing on Brazil, in 1955.

Pomaire was a periodical publication of cultural promotion, too, continuing, in a certain way, with the work of *Pro Arte*. Between 1956 and 1958 *Pomaire* published 18 issues with a team formed by Santiago del Campo as director, Mario Planet as editor and Jorge Costabal Echenique in charge of the section

on architecture. A score of articles on architecture were published; some on the local situation, others on the international scenario, some of them reproductions of authors such as Paul Lester Wiener, Sibyl Moholy-Nagy and Joseph Hudnut, and even some written by Frank Lloyd Wright.

The ideas, projects and works of Chandigarh had a considerable effect on the limited number of articles of the two magazines. The figure of Le Corbusier was recurrent in *Pro Arte*, less in *Pomaire*, but he was definitely a protagonist.

It is symptomatic that the view of *Pro Arte* on Le Corbusier is directly aimed at presenting an architect that is fundamentally a doer, against the utopian view that had attracted attention before (Torrent, Undurraga, 2012). He no longer appeared as a promoter of the radical urban transformation aiming at the materialization of his theories —of the Plan Voisin or the Ville Radieuse —, but as a constructor facing the urban phenomenon with more realistic clues, without abandoning his lyricism and theoretical approach.

Thus, the weekly periodical stated that: «The daring concepts of the ideal "city of the future" that the wise French architect launched at the end of the First World War will become a fact. The personality of someone who was classified as "theorist", "naïve" and "dreamer" now reaches an important place in the field of contemporary building practice" (*Pro Arte*, 1948, p. 1).

This is how the architect was described in his first inclusion in *Pro Arte*, in the first page of the second edition of the weekly periodical. It seems symptomatic that

the first reference to Le Corbusier in a publication of the 1950s would try directly to put back the figure of the architect as a doer and not as a promise, as it had been seen until that moment from the local editorial field.

The articles of *Pro Arte* probably did not show an idealistic or chimerical Le Corbusier, but a concrete and working one, as he was added to the intention of showing achievements in tune with the consolidation moment of modern architecture in the local environment; above all, in harmony with the strengthening of modern ideas like project theory and practice at schools of architecture of local universities between 1947 and 1953.

It is surprising that only in 1947 a publication would acknowledge Le Corbusier as a builder of works. The "Villa Saboya" was already twenty years old and it had been about the same time since the construction of the Oberpaur⁽⁴⁾ building, in Santiago, traditionally considered as the first modern work of architecture in the country.

If the figure of Le Corbusier was historically associated to his urban proposals and to the idea of a theoretical dilettante that did not implement his ideas, it was, probably, because in the 1930s and early 1940s his writings were published more systematically than his works. He was, undoubtedly, better known as a town planner than as an architect, mainly associated to an interest and a debate about modern architecture homogenized by urbanism and planning. That would be the image and those would be the ideas that the articles of *Pro Arte* would try to change.

4. There are two articles on Chandigarh in *Pro Arte*, one published in 1951 and the other in 1954. The first was a text by the French art critic Simone Gille-Delafon, an interview with Le Corbusier in July 1951, and probably published in the periodical *Arts de Paris*, where she was a collaborator. The article, entitled "Le Corbusier and the CIAM build a "Shangri-La" city in India", dealt with the basically spiritual conditions of the society; on the chosen site was an open plain set at the intersection of the main roads of the region and on the background, the Himalaya. Because of that landscape and that culture, Le Corbusier considered that: «Town planning shall, therefore, be ingenious and fine. Not only at an economic and social level. Here we have gone back to biblical times. Things have to be considered from a very special standpoint» (quoted in Gille-Delafon, 1951, p. 11). Regarding climate conditions, the maestro affirmed the following:

«The sun is the great friend; but it is also the great enemy [and thus] the first thing I have done is to abandon the "pilotis" and I have put large parasols over the houses. These parasols will be permanently irrigated. My purpose is to construct very thin buildings, that at the beginning of the night shall send off heat instead of retaining it » (quoted in Gille-Delafon, 1951, p. 11).

The article clearly focussed on an urban and architectural view in relation to the local environment and culture, giving as the main arguments, the conditions of the town planning of the CIAM and the Corbusian lyric. In the last paragraph it referred to Le Corbusier's immediate departure, showing the probable repercussion of his urban strategies on

areas close to our continent:

«He now goes to Bogotá, on the antipodes of India. Bogotá is a secular, traditional, Spanish city. It has recently burst its borders. Once aviation arrived, it was an almost insane expansion, what could be called the "boom", or the top of economic activity. It is necessary to neutralize such an extremely explosive development. From 500 thousand inhabitants it will increase to over one million» (Gille-Delafon, 1951, p. 11).

The second article was written by Juana Subercaseaux (1954), based on the information she had translated for the magazine. The title was "Le Corbusier's 'radiant' city. The most beautiful architectural adventure of our time becomes real in India". It dealt with the idea of a well constituted city versus the monumentalism of its Capitol. Le Corbusier's first ideas were set in the urban network and in his special housing project grouped by areas, in which he respected the relationship with climate and people's traditions.

The article focussed on the theories of areas and the seven ways for the organization of the city plan. But, beyond technical considerations, what was shown was a particular way of thinking the city: «It was in a hotel room in Bombay, where the architect had the clear revelation of the task he should undertake. He understood that what he had to give the Hindu people was not a western aesthetics but to satisfy their life needs. "It is, [Le Corbusier] explains, a problem of resistance and structure, not of folklore and art history." In fact, a type of aesthetics completely new to the "parasol and umbrella" architecture is being built in Chandigarh, since in India one cannot avoid the sun, the rain and the winds. By

building a “climate wall”, Le Corbusier has brought up to date over forty years of research» (Subercaseaux, 1954, p. 5).

The interpretation echoed by Pro Arte was apparently quite predominant at the time; the idea of Chandigarh as a “Ville radieuse” adapted to local conditions had already been presented in periodical publications like *L’Architecture d’aujourd’hui*, which in its edition number 46 published an article by Ashoke Nair entitled “Chandigarh – Ville Radieuse des Indes: une capitale construite par des architectes français”, and would continue to appear in the article that Maxwell Fry published in *Architectural Record* (Vol. 117, n.° 223), entitled “Chandigarh New Capital City”, which highlighted the main points of the relationship with climate, sun, rain and the climate walls that formed the brise-soleil, aspects that in 1956 Fry would also develop in the book *Tropical Architecture*, written together with Jane Drew.

But Pro Arte’s interpretation would not be just that, it also had an esoteric touch, it referred to the Open Hand Monument, to the symbolic figure representing the harmonious spiral and the signs of the new town planning. A city respectful of «traditions and the contact with nature» (Subercaseaux, 1954, p. 6).

It is symptomatic that the title of the text refers to the “Ville radieuse”, which had been Le Corbusier’s most widely published and probably the most acknowledged in Chile, which at the same time had shaped the idea of the theoretical town planner. And it appeared facing the dream place, the Shangri-la, that fictitious place that the English novelist James Hilton had described in his

novel *Lost Horizons*, in 1933, published in Spanish by Editorial Peuser in Buenos Aires in 1945, a utopian, idyllic, spiritual place for the development of a perfect society in contact with nature.

5. Pomaire, published “Le Corbusier gives a new structure to India”, by Joseph Hudnut, Dean of the Graduate School of Design of Harvard University between 1936 and 1953. The tone was again quite close to the idea of showing the maestro in a new facet:

«It cannot be denied that Le Corbusier is a virtuoso in the art of sensationalism. I think that the need is an excuse for this resource; but, in any case, his speculations, brilliant as they are, could not explain by themselves his tremendous influence. His speculations have dazzled his time, but it is the use that has been made of them what makes them important. The provocative and attractive designs, fertile fruit of his imagination, would have been forgotten like fair fantasies if they had not reached beyond their originality and ingenuity, a harmony that deeply brings forth our mentality. If he had not shown us, by means of his plastic language, that our structural possibilities could have charm and proportion as eloquently as any other sensitivity and human sense » (Hudnut, 1957, p. 13).

The text highlighted extensively the capacity to transcend the problems proposed by the words “style” and “international”: while “style” could only be applied to something “finished”, “international” could only refer to an «architecture devoid of character and evolutionary capacity», the Corbusian ideas rather supported a living architecture that «would permanently be producing new elements and deducing,

from its practice, new resources and new forms » (Hudnut, 1957, p. 13).

Hudnut regarded Le Corbusier’s works as: «Beautiful essays on the art of abstraction, but significant only as they bring up the problem of the new plastic arts in their relationship with life in the society of our time and the progress of our technique. They make us see that contemporary structures are capable of solving the demands of modern life, without losing sight of the emotional aspect; the world had waited for this message for a long time and, I believe, this would have been less convincing if Le Corbusier had not found the way to validate his principles for a wide social conglomerate» (Hudnut, 1957, p. 13).

And in that context, together with other urban projects, Chandigarh seemed «his definite recognition» (Hudnut, 1957, p. 13).

The photograph illustrating the article was a lateral view of the portico of the Court of Justice, with some people walking, and the reinforced concrete brise-soleil stands out as a dominant feature. The footnote of the photograph, probably drafted by the editors, indicated:

«Building of the Court of Justice in Chandigarh, capital of the state of the Punjab, India, city that is being constructed entirely under the direction of Le Corbusier. The central idea is to show that contemporary structures are capable of solving the demands of modern life, without losing sight of the emotional aspect. The experience shall continue in Brazil⁽⁵⁾» (Pomaire, 1957).


The ideas spread in Chile about the Chandigarh experience, although

probably confirming that the views that historiography has later supported, about this case and also about the one in Brasilia – as announced in the footnote – have been notably different from the ones acknowledged by the intellectual and cultural sector that constituted the readership of the Chilean cultural publications.

Joseph Hudnut proposed that «Society propiciates the architecture that interprets its aspirations, as a spontaneous process of selection, whether right or wrong », and that «The architect´s wish to impose his principles is positively limited by the satisfaction of his client », pointing out that in order to create architecture, you have to obtain the understanding of the public: «Only architecture that is supported by the public and recognized as its own shall survive» (1957, p. 13).

On the other hand, Gille-Delafon, stated that the fabric of everyday life is highlighted in the city on the dominant monuments, even though the image of the Capitol has been the one that traditionally refers to the city.

Juana Subercaseaux affirmed the entirely new aesthetics of the city, not because of the monumental condition of big buildings, but for that «parasol and umbrella architecture, as in India one cannot avoid the sun, the rain and the winds», pointing out that building a “climate wall”, Le Corbusier has brought up to date over 40 years of research (...) These are details that do not get much attention once you get used to them» (1954, p. 5). Regarding the end, Subercaseaux stated that: «Chandigarh will not be like other cities. It has its signs » (1954, p. 5), referring to the open hand monument. The city attracted attention for a non

monumental kind of heritage. Although it is generally the Capitol buildings that represent the city and its architecture, what was presented in Chile was clearly different. Not the Capitol as a monument, but the landscape, the urban configuration, the response to tradition, the everyday life conditions, the ways of adapting to the climate; and how these outstanding points were interpreted in a plan and an architecture capable of combining modernity with the spiritual and environmental conditions of a culture. 

NOTES:

(1) N. from the editor: The Taj Mahal and the Red Fort are examples of the mughal style.

(2) N. from the editor: Shilpa Shastras is the name of a series of hinduist texts that describe manual arts, religious iconography, sculpture and architecture (although the texts that deal more specifically with architecture are collected in the Vastu Shastra, a hinduist doctrine on the relationship between the laws of nature and human dwellings).

(3) A more extensive version of what follows in this article was presented at the 1ra Conferencia Internacional “Conectando Patrimonios de la Humanidad y Civilizaciones”, (1st International Conference “Connecting Human Heritage and civilizations”) organized by Universidad Mayor, the Embassy of India and the Embassy of Mexico in Chile between 31st may and 1st June, 2012.

(4) N. from the editor: on behalf of the German businessman Overpaur, Sergio Larrain G. M. and Jorge Arteaga designed the building set on the south west corner of the streets Estado and Huérfanos.

(5) The periodical proposed to address the planning of the new capital of Brazil, which was being favoured at the same time.

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