

BY JOHN O'SHEA

A Unique Harmony

THIS PAGE The Open Hand designed by Le Corbusier. © Fernanda Antonio © F.L.C./ADAGP, Paris / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York 2015
PREVIOUS PAGE CHAND L.C. 4336. Working drawing of the High Court by Le Corbusier, 3 May 1951. © F.L.C./ADAGP, Paris / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York 2015

BUILDING THE FUTURE

There was anxiety and anguish in taking decisions on that vast, limitless ground ... The problem was no longer one of reasoning but of sensation ... It was a matter of occupying the plain. The geometrical event was, in truth, a sculpture of the intellect... It was a tension ... a battle of space, fought within the mind. Arithmetic, texturique,¹ geometrics: it would all be there when the whole was finished. For the moment, oxen, cows and goats, driven by peasants, crossed the sun scorched fields. — LE CORBUSIER²

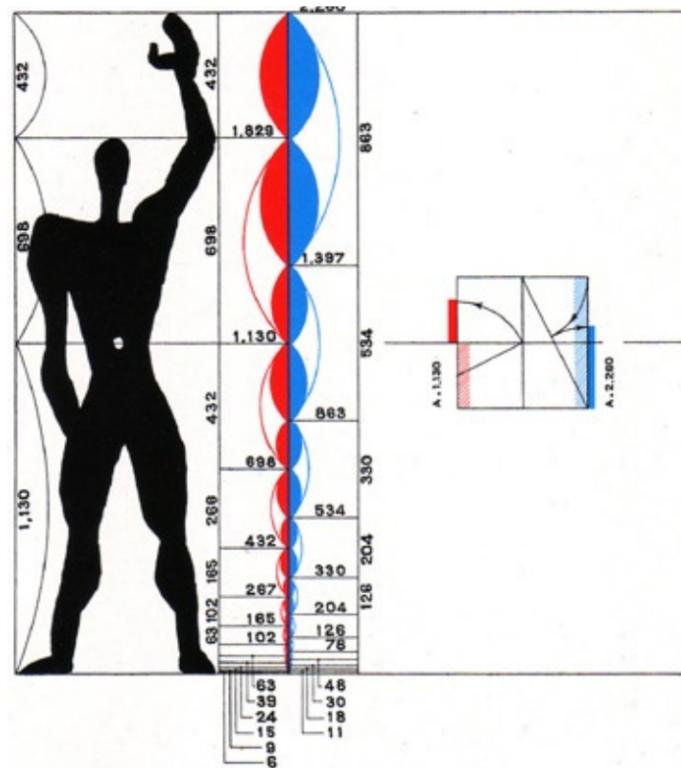
Following Indian Independence and the resulting partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, a new administrative capital was needed for the Indian Punjab. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru proclaimed that the building of the new city of Chandigarh was to be 'symbolic of the freedom of India, unfettered by the traditions of the past...an expression of the nation's faith in the future'. The commission was originally awarded to the American architect Albert Mayer, but after he withdrew from the project, Le Corbusier was approached to work on a masterplan for the new city. Here was the opportunity the great architect had been waiting for since the 1920s: to construct an entire city and thus fully realize his thesis on urban design. After complex negotiations, Le Corbusier agreed to accept

the commission on condition that his cousin, and collaborator since 1922, Pierre Jeanneret serve as project architect:

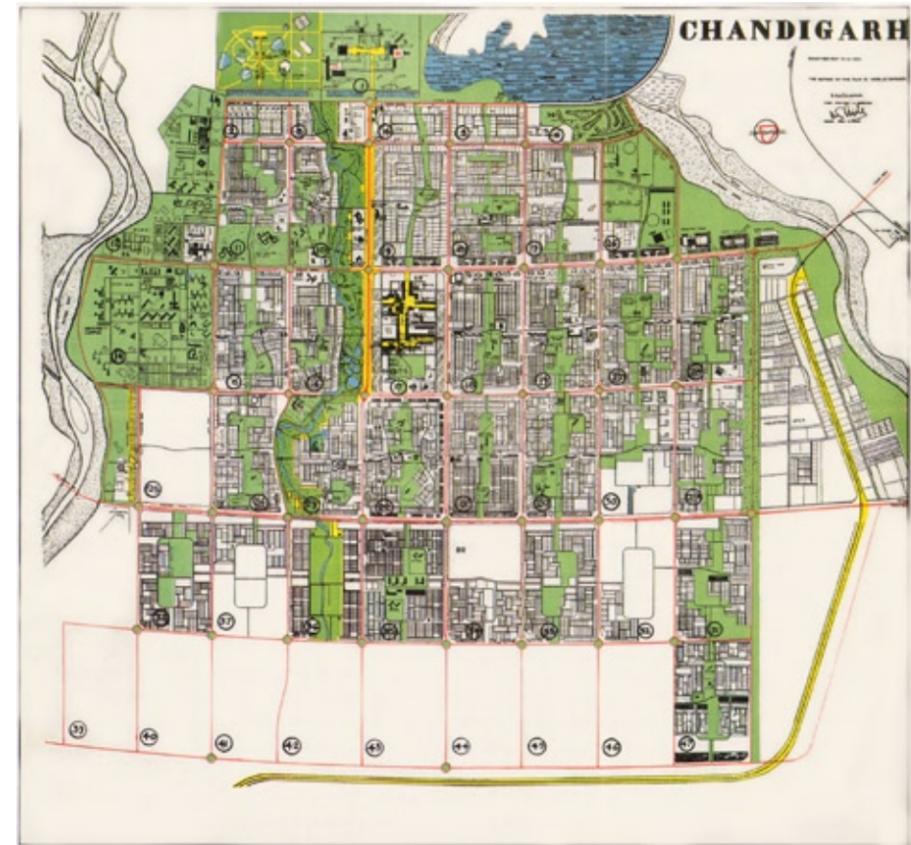
In 1922 I joined forces with my cousin, Pierre Jeanneret. With loyalty, optimism, initiative and persistence, with good humour... and in league with the resistance forces of the age we set to work. Two men who understand each other are worth three who stand alone. By never pursuing lucrative goals, by refusing to make compromises, but, rather, being in love with our passionate quest, which is what makes life worth living, we have managed to occupy the entire field of architecture, from the minutest detail to the vast plans of a city. — LE CORBUSIER³

The team had a colossal task: to deliver the masterplan, which included infrastructure, landscaping and buildings for uses related to education, government, healthcare and recreation, as well as housing for all of the city's new inhabitants. Le Corbusier saw himself as the 'Spiritual Director' of the project and appointed himself two main tasks: shaping the masterplan and designing the Capitol Complex, the group of buildings dedicated to governance. Jeanneret's role was to run the site office at Chandigarh, overseeing the design and construction of the city as an integrated whole.

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LEFT Fig. 1 Le Corbusier's Modulor Proportioning System is the basis for the design of Chandigarh © F.L.C./ADAGP, Paris/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York 2015. RIGHT Fig. 2 Early Master Plan of Chandigarh, drawing by Le Corbusier. © F.L.C./ADAGP, Paris/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York 2015.



THE MASTERPLAN

Faced with the challenge of planning a new city for 500,000 people on a vast rural site, Le Corbusier turned to geometry and his recently patented invention, the Modulor, a proportional system for design based on a set of measurements — relating to the ‘golden section’ (a ratio of approximately 1:618) — taken from a ‘universal’ human form, Modulor Man. ^[fig.1]

On the 28th March, 1951, at Chandigarh, at sunset, we had set off in a jeep across the still empty site of the capital – Varma, Fry, Pierre Jeanneret and myself. Never had spring been so lovely, the air so pure after a storm the day before, the horizons so clear, the mango trees so gigantic and magnificent. We were at the end of our task (the first): we had created the city (the town plan).

I had noticed then that I had lost the box of the Modulor, of the only Modulor strip in existence, made by Soltan in 1945, which had not left my pocket in six years ... A grubby box splitting at the edge.⁴ During that last visit of the site before my return to Paris, the Modulor had fallen from the jeep onto the soil of the fields that were to disappear to make way for the capital. It is there now, in the very heart of the place, integrated in the soil. Soon it will flower in all the measurements of the first city of the world to be organized all of a piece in accordance with the harmonious scale. — LE CORBUSIER⁵

The principles of Albert Mayer's original plan for Chandigarh that aligned with Le Corbusier's theories on urban planning were retained: differentiated zones for civic functions, with residential, industrial, business and governance activities separated by a circulatory transport system. The most radical of Le Corbusier's departures from Mayer's plan was the implementation of an ordered rectilinearity to the masterplan grid. This ordering was governed by the dimensions of a residential sector, a basic unit of 800 × 1200 metres derived from his proportional system. Each of these sectors was designed as a self-sufficient neighbourhood for living, working and leisure, and whose dimensions meant a person could walk to its centre from any point within ten minutes. The sectors were subdivided into ‘villages’ of around 150 houses – the size of a typical Punjabi village. At Chandigarh, the polemic plans of Le Corbusier's early speculations are tempered by the realities of the site and local context. The iconic towers of the utopian model are replaced with low-slung residential superblocks, and the traffic systems are designed to accommodate native modes of transport including rickshaws and camels. ^[fig.2]

A UNIQUE HARMONY

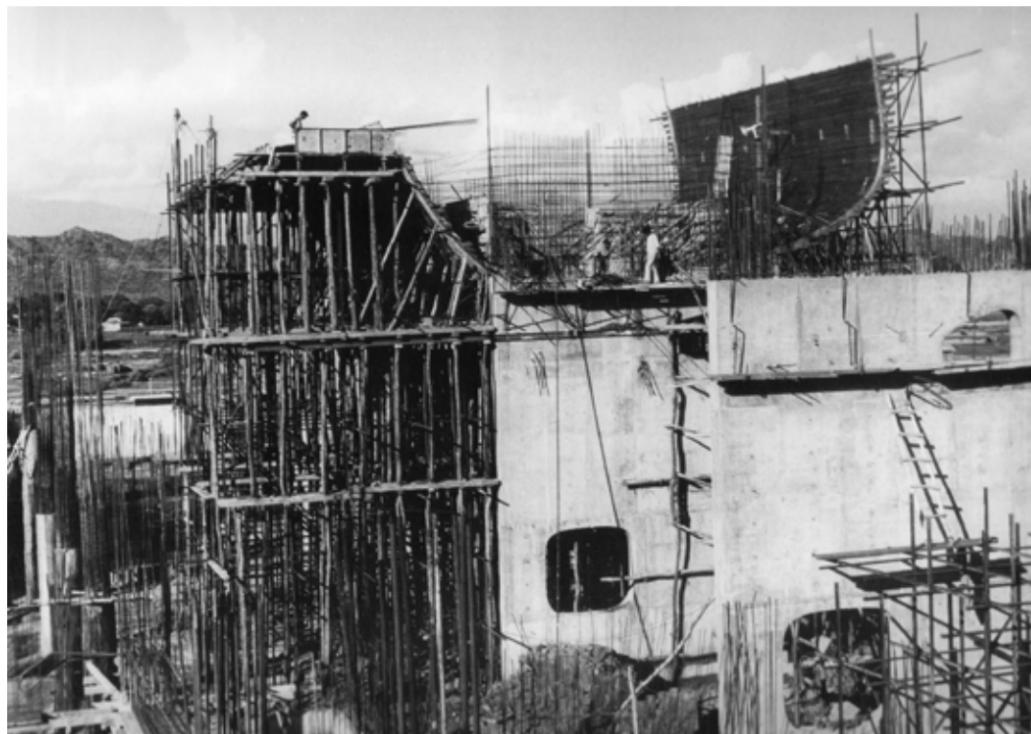
I say it with pride. Finally here at 67 years of age ... I was able to erect an architecture which fulfils day to day functions but which leads to jubilation. — LE CORBUSIER⁶

The Chandigarh project was Le Corbusier's most important commission, a rare opportunity to create a Gesamtkunstwerk: a ‘total work of art’ encompassing masterplan, neighbourhood layout, landscaping, construction, interiors and furnishings. In the very fabric of the city, and at every scale, lie Le Corbusier's two great inspirations and disciplines: geometry and symbolism. The arithmetical ratios of the Modulor ensure a harmonious relationship between elements, but it is at the intimate human scale of Chandigarh's furniture, its interior ‘equipment’, that we can most directly experience the exactitudes and harmoniousness of this proportional system.

Here, too, we find some of the clearest distillations of the recurring motifs that represent Le Corbusier's philosophy: the harmonic spiral of the Accused Cabin, Le Jeu Du Soleil translated into the base of the Conference Table. These iconic pieces sit alongside the utilitarian pieces designed by Pierre Jeanneret to furnish the public buildings of the city, responding directly to the disciplines of economy, materiality

and climate. The Judge's Desk is arguably the most important item of furniture from Chandigarh. A direct expression of Le Corbusier's unique vision, the piece is able to fully assert its ceremonial function, while also being a memorable embodiment of the architect's fascination with geometry, texturique and symbolism.

The aesthetic sense will not depend in any case on the richness of the material or on what it is meant to be, but on the richness of spirit, imagination and invention. A work without invention and truth will not be a milestone across the centuries. — PIERRE JEANNERET⁷



UPPERLEFT The Legislative Assembly site, photographed by Pierre Jeanneret, 1955. © Getty Trust / ADAGP, Paris / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York 2015. LOWERLEFT Chief Engineer P.L. Varma, Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret. Photo J. Malhotra © F.L.C./ADAGP, Paris / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York 2015. NEXT PAGE Le Corbusier's open hand on the Capitol site, 1951.

ENDNOTES

1. Le Corbusier supplies a definition of the term 'texturique' in *Modulor 2*: 'Texturique: Larousse's Dictionary explains: connection, arrangement of the parts of a work, or of the parts of a body.'
2. Le Corbusier, *Modulor 2* (London: Faber and Faber, 1958), translated from the French edition, *Modulor II* (Paris: Editions d'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui, 1955)
3. Le Corbusier, 'Pierre Jeanneret: A Testament to the Memory of an Extraordinary Architect', *Design*, Vol. 23, No. 5 (May 1979)
4. When Le Corbusier refers to 'the box of the Modulor', he means a box containing a two-sided measuring tape marked with the Modulor scale, which was made for him by Polish architect Jerzy Sołtan, one of Le Corbusier's collaborators.
5. Le Corbusier, *Modulor 2* (London: Faber and Faber, 1958), translated from the French edition, *Modulor II* (Paris: Editions d'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui, 1955)
6. See Le Corbusier, *Le Corbusier Sketchbooks, Volume 3 (1954-1957)* (Cambridge: MIT Press 1982)
7. Pierre Jeanneret, 'Aesthetic: Reflections on Beauty of Line, Shape and Form', *Marg*, Vol. XV, No. 1 (December 1961)