

## Le Corbusier – Harbinger of Modernism

It is perhaps fitting that the exhibition of Le Corbusier's work at the Hayward Gallery earlier this year should have terminated with his projects for India. For this country provided him with an unprecedented opportunity to realize some of his urban theories and architectural themes he had been developing over the last 25 years.

The choice of Corb to lead the design team for the planning of Chandigarh was not fortuitous. India had become independent in 1947. Despite the horrors of partition, optimism was in the air. Movements in both architectural and art circles sought a revitalization of Indian culture. The Bombay Progressive Group of Artists issued a manifesto advocating the adoption of European aesthetic styles in 1947; they were followed by similar groups in Calcutta and elsewhere.

For the government, the embracing of technology was to be pivotal in sweeping away the cobwebs of colonialism and the fetters of tradition. This belief in the universality of science, of its capacity as the generator of equitable social relations was really a part of the modernist scheme, a programme that had its roots in the ideals of the French Enlightenment.

Modernism's vision of the infinite development of knowledge and social progress was shared by some tendencies in the arts and architecture. The underlying basis was Europe's burgeoning industrial base, the development of capitalism. An essential component was the equating of tradition with backwardness and modernity with progress.

For a developing country which sought to widen its industrial base, one which had been subjected to cultural colonialism, this essentially European endeavour was perhaps the only one available. The upheavals of the 60s and the 70s were not yet discernible on the horizon.

Although new towns had been planned under British rule, the choice of Corb heralded the decisive arrival of modernism in India, an occupation that has had a lasting influence in town planning and perhaps more so in the production of buildings.

### Chandigarh

Corb's work in India was really an extension of his past projects although there was a certain refinement and synthesis. The urban plan for Chandigarh with its intersecting axes is reminiscent of his proposals for Berlin and Bogota. Jaipur, the Indian city founded in the 18<sup>th</sup> century by Jai Singh has similar axes which can also be found in the planning diagrams in ancient Indian texts; but it is doubtful whether Corb or any of the members of his team were ever acquainted with these.

The zoning, the organization and division of the sectors are essential ingredients of modernist town planning theories, principles which have since been challenged in Europe and other countries including India. In Chandigarh, these criticisms become even more urgent due to the presence of historical centres in India. Unlike the streets in these centres, the one at Chandigarh do not allow multifunctional usage. The negotiation of large open spaces and long distances becomes a difficult proposition in the extreme climate. Perhaps the most important drawback is that the plan does not provide for all the inhabitants nor does it allow the necessary mixing of classes. Nevertheless, it is liked by some inhabitants for the same reasons – the provision of open spaces and the relatively clean air.

### Buildings

Corbusier's buildings have had a more lasting impact. The architectural devices he had honed in his previous work were all deployed here. The *brise soleil*, the ramp, the *pilotis*,

exposed concrete, the floating umbrella like roof have since appeared in the work of Indian architects and have in fact, spread all over the tropical world. Some of these, such as the window openings that first appeared at Ronchamp, were suited to the harsh glare. Others, such as the sunlouvres, actually acerbate heat gain.

The programme of the buildings also had precedents. The Sarabhai Villa in Ahmedabad further explored the use of concrete vaults and bricks of the Jaoul houses.

Despite Corb's intentions, his buildings mostly failed to respond adequately to the climate as Sunand Prasad notes in the catalogue. This is the primary failing of modernist architecture for in its haste to sweep away tradition, it replaced the accrued knowledge of built responses to the climate with an aesthetic style.

## **The Exhibition**

Corb's influence was of course not restricted to the tropics. A practised polemist, his architectural devices appeared in the work of architects all over the world and continue to do so. The influence of his infamous urban projects, including the one for Algiers which set a ribbon like highway above the existing city, are perhaps more widely known. But this was not apparent in the exhibition.

The other five sections which dealt with his paintings, furniture, urban projects, ecclesiastical and public buildings lacked any historical or contemporary context. So that despite the potential of this schema, it was really an exhibition for Corb devotees – although for some unknown peculiar reasons, the organizers omitted the seminal glass and steel exhibition pavilion in Zurich even though a pair of the famous spectacles were displayed. The arrangement was devised to physically tax the viewer.

Captions were often at knee level, models were placed for seven foot giants to peer at, photographs rarely included the environs of the buildings and the lighting was inadequate or non-existent. Microscopic plans with the key in French did not help either. In order to locate the buildings on the beautiful original hardwood model of the Chandigarh Capitol Complex, one had to hunt for a tiny plan (in French naturally) on the wall behind.

Architectural exhibitions are notoriously difficult to organize as they have to make themselves understood to the layperson and at the same time, interest the architect. In this case, it did neither. The great man, or as the exhibition put it, the 'Architect of the Century', deserved better.