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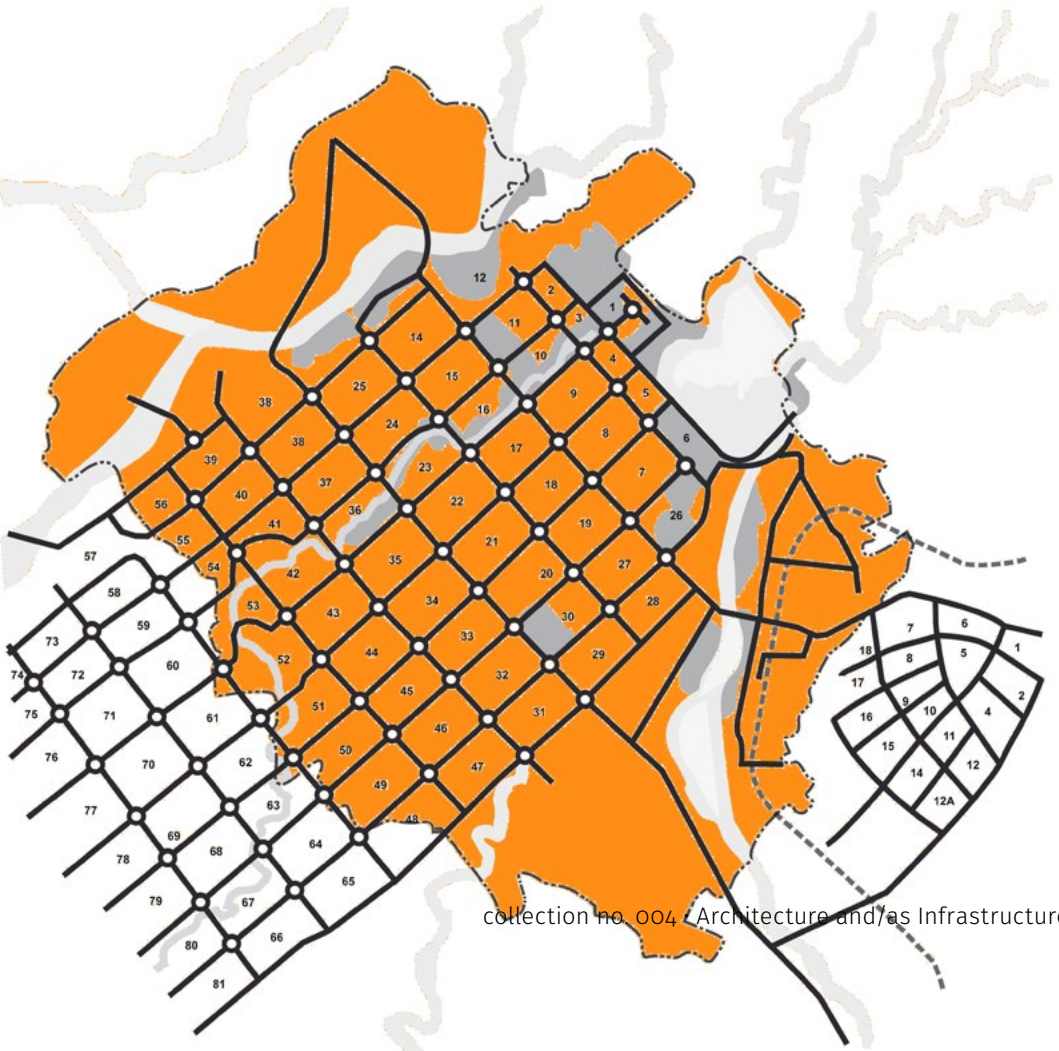
Chandigarh beyond Le Corbusier

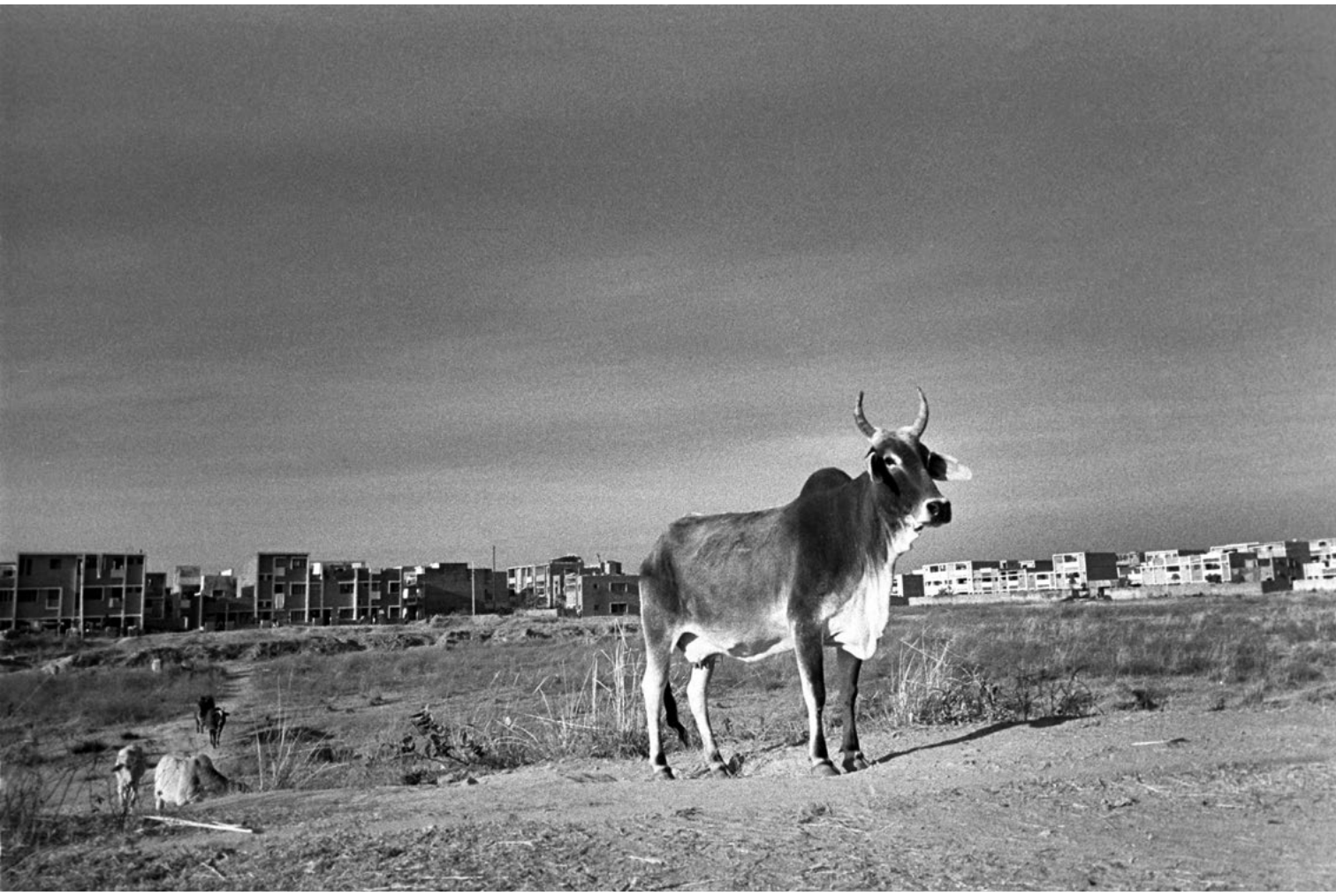
Bärbel Högner and Jürg Gasser

Chandigarh, located 250 km north of New Delhi, represents an outstanding example of postcolonial urban planning. When construction of the city from scratch started in 1951, the gigantic project showcased India's ambitions towards modernisation after independence. It drew the attention of architects and urban planners worldwide, since Le Corbusier (1887–1965) was commissioned as architectural advisor. The French avant-garde architect finalised the masterplan according to ideas of Western functionalism, and he designed three government buildings for the capital of Punjab province. UNESCO's recognition of these brutalist structures, the Capitol Complex, as a World Heritage Site in 2016 fostered the internationally widespread narrative of Chandigarh being an artefact created by Le Corbusier. However, a closer look at its genesis reveals that really the scale, infrastructure and look of the city were all envisioned and implemented by Indian administrators and engineers. More than one million people live in the so-called City Beautiful today and Le Corbusier undoubtedly shaped a unique urbanism. Yet, drawing on ethnographic explorations during 18 months of fieldwork between 2006 and 2013, I argue that Chandigarh's development towards a pulsating habitat rests upon the agency of those Indian authorities, who in 1947 boldly initiated the conceptual city with contemporary physical and social infrastructures.

Main road towards the administrative sector Capitol Complex with assembly building by Le Corbusier, 1968.
Photo: Jürg Gasser, 1968.



The "functional city" inside Chandigarh's wider territory (orange). The concept designates spaces for living, working, leisure and circulation. In 1966, political changes in the Punjab led to the emergence of two satellite towns outside the masterplan.
Map: Bärbel Högner, 2009.



From rural to urban – completed low-rise private housing according to the city's bye-laws, 1968.
Photo: Jürg Gasser, 1968.

In 1948, the Chandigarh chief engineer Varma, chief commissioner Thapar and engineer Dogra set out in a small plane looking for a site to realise a capital for the newly formed Indian province of Punjab. Their mission was loaded with ambitions and emotions. Before the independence of India, their families had lived in Lahore, the cultural and economic hub of undivided Punjab. Under British colonial rule, the city – known for its Mughal architecture in the walled centre – expanded: business activities boomed, education facilities developed and residential quarters with systematic layouts emerged. The three men, trained at British colleges, belonged to elite Indian circles. But as Hindus and Sikhs, they had to join the mass exodus of millions of people crossing the new border when imperial British India was split and the Punjab territory subsequently divided, with Lahore assigned to Pakistan. Hence, the Indian Punjab required an alternative administrative centre. Sharma, who joined the project as a young architect, explained that the concerned government officers imagined a newly planned urban settlement that would be "better than Lahore" (Hogner 2010: 163). "Better" here referred to the idea of state-of-the-art infrastructure and an ultra-modern aesthetics: something new and different in response to the loss of Lahore.

The Flower Festival in Chandigarh. City statistics for 2017 listed the number of open green spaces as 96 parks and 1807 neighbourhood spaces. Photo: Bärbel Högner, 2009.

From a bird's-eye view the men chose a piece of land located between two rivers. Notably, they were already picturing a city for half a million inhabitants, whereas the concurrently planned Bhubaneswar in India's eastern state of Odisha aimed at a population of 30,000. The selected site met all the needs: a slight slope for the drainage system, riverbeds providing sand and stones required in the construction, and mountains on the horizon offering a beautiful view.

Upon arrival in January 1951, Le Corbusier and his three European colleagues who would share the massive task, appreciated the qualities of terrain, too. Things on the ground were prepared after lengthy negotiations with the Indigenous population of the area, whose villages needed to be demolished in favour of the coming urban structure. Le Corbusier was eager to implement Europe's then urbanistic zeitgeist: the Functional City. He had explained the concept when Varma and Thapar arrived at his Paris studio in 1950 in search of an experienced architect who would collaborate with Indian engineers and architects. The Swiss-born French star architect was attracted by the magnitude of the project but was unwilling to leave France. This led to the creation of a 'senior team' with his cousin Pierre Jeanneret and the British couple Maxwell Fry

and Jane Drew, who stayed in situ. Le Corbusier would detail plans with his team in Paris and visit India twice a year.

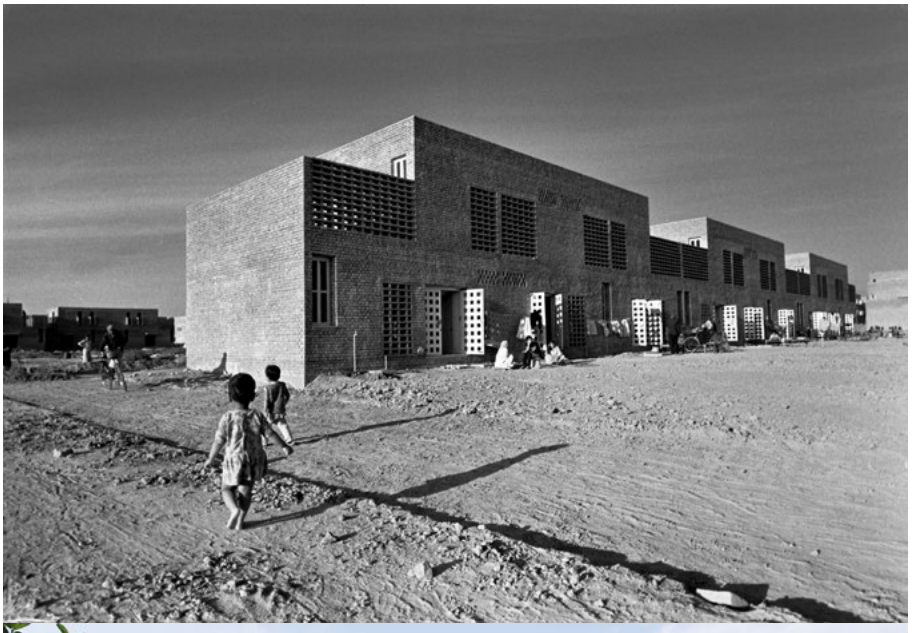
Surprisingly, the Indian authorities immediately accepted his quickly sketched abstract masterplan. Even today, the composition of an entire city in grid pattern through uniform rectangular sectors is considered an 'alien' model in India. The expansiveness and rationality of this urbanism were – and are – the antipode of what is regarded as a typical Indian city which extends organically from an inner core over time. Two reasons may explain the approval of the radical plan. Firstly, the project's audacity suited the national ideology of modernising the nation. It was supported by India's first Prime Minister Nehru, who viewed Chandigarh as an experiment that would inspire

Orientation in the systematically planned city in 1968: every address radiates moderness as it consists purely of numbers (sector # and house #).
Photo: Jürg Gasser, 1968

Market roads were an integral part of the sectors' planned social infrastructure. They traverse and connect the sectors and have become busy shopping areas.
Photo: Bärbel Högner, 2009.

the built environment of the new India (Khilnani 1999: 107–49). Secondly, as Sharma told me, the Punjabi clients were quickly convinced, since the schematic layout of straight roads on the ground and likewise straight pipes below promised an effective and economical implementation within their tight budget.

While the seemingly non-Indian masterplan was adopted outright, the Indian administrators rejected Le Corbusier's preference of high-rise dwellings. They insisted on low-rise housing according to garden-city ideals as experienced in British colonial urban planning. Being an administrative seat, Chandigarh required vast areas of government housing for public servants. The construction was guided by social criteria and this was emphasised by the Indian planners, who intended to turn away from the character



Early government housing in 1968, designed by Jeanneret, who lived as first chief architect in Chandigarh for fifteen years, and the British architect couple Fry and Drew who stayed from 1951 to 1954.
Photo: Jürg Gasser, 1968.

Maintenance of the Chandigarh-Style, referred to as "straight line" by residents. The availability of hand-made bricks and the climatic conditions (temperatures, wind and monsoon) led to purist design principles.
Photo: Bärbel Högner, 2009.

Growth of the tree concept (as of 1968) to provide shade for drivers along the main roads. Indigenous plants from all over India were collected to beautify the city with different flowers and foliage.
Photo: Jürg Gasser, 1968.

of 'old cities', where density and rudimentary sanitation prevailed. The Chandigarh project mandated that all government employees would receive the same quality of housing, regardless of their rank and social status: each house had water, drainage and electricity and was equipped with a courtyard or garden. The provision of such area-wide infrastructural fittings was a sensation in India at the time, marking the city as a role-model for postcolonial urbanisation.

The basic element of the masterplan was the autonomous neighbourhood unit. The task of filling the first sectors with everyday architecture lay in the hands of the senior team, who cooperated with young Indian architects. Their cubist-influenced design approach of the 1950s – termed the Chandigarh-Style (Joshi 1999) – extended to all public buildings, such as schools, colleges, hospitals, sports facilities or market roads. Remarkably, the overall look of the city was also born from the thoughts of the Punjabi authorities. In anticipation of the habits of future residents, who might want to improvise housing according to personal needs, they had strict bye-laws on construction worked out in 1951. These rules – still in place today – provided a comprehensive aesthetics for the new capital, clearly indicating the notion of a planned and modern settlement.

Chandigarh's road network extends to a length of 3270km (as per 2017 figures). Street types range from three-lane main roads defining the sectors to paths within housing areas.
Photo: Bärbel Högner, 2009.

Chandigarh was the first city in India to have an overall sewerage system including storm-water drainage. In the 1950s, when few vehicles circulated within the city, the road network seemed futuristic. But in the meantime, the city founders' vision to build something grand has paid off. All fifty-six sectors are now filled, the road system is perfectly maintained and the place is liberally dotted with open green spaces. Chandigarh has advanced as a regional hub for administration, health services and education. Young people from all over India come to study, migration for all kinds of work continues and the city ranks among India's highest in terms of per-capita income.

Compared to other cities on the subcontinent, the City Beautiful has less smog, less congestion, less dirt and many trees. The architecture once set striking new standards but has become something accepted simply as part of the fabric of everyday reality. By contrast, the physical and social infrastructures continue to have a great impact on residents' feelings about their city. A number of my interview partners summarised the value of the place with the likes of: "The city has good roads, good parks, good schools and good doctors," often complemented by: "We don't want to live anywhere else."

Slowly the enforced urban modernity merged with the multitude of regional customs, religious rituals and social habits. The diversity of people settling in Chandigarh from all over the country led to its self-attribution as being a Mini-India – a positive notion referring to tolerance in coexisting. Yet representing all facets of India also involves the critical issue of social divides along the lines of caste and class. The most obvious manifestation of this is the presence of slums and so-called colonies. These appeared in the 1960s as the built environment expanded inside the masterplan's area and the masses of construction workers were gradually forced to shift their huts to its margins (Sarin 1982). This situation revealed a shortcoming of the city's concept: Chandigarh was planned for people with a formal regular income. Those who earn their living on a day-to-day basis have the right to work in – and for – the city, but the masterplan did not foresee plots for them to dwell within its territory. The elimination of slums is an ongoing topic in the local media, because their existence spoils the image of the impeccable new place.

One could discredit the Indian planners for this oversight or – compared with the case of Brasília – criticise the modernist city concept per se (Holston 1989). However, when looking at the original objective – to build a new and better Lahore – the sustainable aspects of the city's radical planning deserve acknowledgement. Although the population has long been double the envisioned number, the ideals of site-specific architecture and infrastructure have not drifted apart, because the majority of inhabitants identify with the city's formal design and seek its continuity. The chance to live in a location that is "new and different" is the trademark of Chandigarh. My ethnographic enquiry revealed manifold personal meanings attached to the city's materiality, such as residents articulating emotions of "feeling close to nature" or the city giving them "personal freedom" in contrast to other Indian urban settings (Högner 2017: 288–311). Multifaceted living environments beyond Le Corbusier's interventions have arisen in Chandigarh. And yet, it is precisely the Indian authorities' agency of the early days that has allowed for the emergence of a vibrant cityscape. Their vision of a durable infrastructural framework had long-lasting impacts: like a skeleton, it holds together the diverse social fabric of today's Chandigarh.

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Bärbel Högner is a documentary photographer and anthropologist specialising in visual and urban anthropology with a thematic focus on transnational modernist architecture. The findings in this article are based on her field studies, carried out between 2006 and 2013, resulting in two monographs (see references): a photographic documentation of Chandigarh (2010) and her PhD research, an ethnography of the planned city (2017). Her images have been exhibited in various museums and galleries, among them Weltkulturen Museum in Frankfurt/Main and Museum aan de Stroom in Antwerp. With Susanne Fehlings, she is the founder and speaker of the working group on urban anthropology at the German Anthropological Association. She works as a freelance journalist and lecturer and is currently preparing an exhibition on tropical architecture in Brazil.

Jürg Gasser works as photographer, filmmaker and realises exhibitions. In 1968 he created the first ever exhibition on Chandigarh at the Pavillon Le Corbusier in Zürich. For this purpose, he had spent three weeks in the planned city documenting in analogue b/w-photographs the development and the appropriation of the place.

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