

Inheriting Modernism: Rethinking Chandigarh in the Post-colonial Frame

VIKRAMADITYA PRAKASH
University of Washington

INHERITING MODERNISM

Speaking at a conference on the Theatres of Decolonization, Gayatri C. Spivak, the well known post-colonial critic and intellectual, made a case for freeing colonial architecture from the unhappy memory of colonization. It is "silly" she argued to shadow box with the "mundane movement of the European colonies upon Indian soil...in the era of economic restructuring."¹ "The contemporary hybrid Indian, a product like us of history," she argued, has internalized the idiom of minor colonial architecture now. And this, she said, should be respected, if respect for the representative Indian citizen of today is the fundamental goal of decolonization.

In that same presentation, however, Spivak threw away modernism in her astonishment at the obstinate lingering to *guruvara*, worn like a badge of honor by Le Corbusier's Indian associates. Modernism, Nehru's planned hybridity, Spivak reminded, was a failure because it did not put decolonization on stage. A failure, by implication therefore, should not qualify as a badge of honor.

I have elsewhere written of the "badge of honor" worn even today by Le Corbusier's associates in India. This badge, I have argued, tells the story of the "little people," the "junior architects" of the Chandigarh Capital Project, for whom working for Le Corbusier, and later rebelling against him – all of that while wearing the badge of honor – were the little acts about fledgling their identities in the tiny, day-to-day, miniscule slips that occurred in the overlaid folds of authority. Such are the little-scale inscriptions, laboriously pursued day to day, that inscribe post-colonial identity.²

That is another paper. Here I want to speak on behalf of my generation – those of us who inherited modernism from our parents. I was born and brought up in Chandigarh, and I speak of our modernism; our properly post-colonial legacy. Unlike colonial architecture, that came with the invading forces, modernism was invited to India as the nation-state's attempt at self-definition. Its failures and successes, from the point of view of its contemporary, "post-modern" inheritors, must therefore be written as those of the Indian nation-state (not those of the supposedly universal ideals of the West). Only such a writing would enable this "postmodern" generation to properly claim modernism, with all its rights and responsibilities, as its own inheritance. As another *Indian* modernism.

Born and brought up in Chandigarh, I write its history to make this claim.

Let me begin by making a decidedly exaggerated but not wholly inaccurate claim that the largest body of high modernism, the very best kind, is not in the mythical centers of the West, but in the metropolitan centers of the so-called Third World. And more, these buildings not only can be found everywhere, they are also the widely revered, even if conflictually claimed and contested. Why is this so?

In the post-colonial world, modernism is part of our own history; "Indian" catachrestic self-inscription, the writing of the nation-state, the founding counter-colonial gesture, albeit a failed one, "India must catch up with the progress of the West." This gesture is not the same as the colonial one, and its colonial architecture, that was brought to the colonized lands with invading armies; the colonizers took colonial architecture with them, broadly speaking.

In the post-colonial scenario the former colonizer was still representative of the idea of progress. This is a properly post-colonial inheritance. If it is questionable it is from the abstract logic that India must be "Indian." While I support this, abstractly speaking, I also remember that it was the colonizers who also insisted that "India must be Indian," albeit the "enlightened" ones. This is therefore a colonial proposition, as well.

"India must be Indian," "India must catch up with the more progressive West," thus are both colonial inheritances. And together, as two sides of the same coin, they form the two intolerable extremes of a single double bind, which is the description of the properly post-colonial situation. The post-colonial must act in terms of, or rather, *through* this double bind. Not this or that, but both simultaneously. There is no other way out. Take one position or the other, you are simply re-staging a colonial play.

The adoption of modernism in the third world, thus, must be understood as part of the inhabitation of this single double-bind. This double-bind can be written as: yes we must act as Indians (self-determination), but we must also not give up access to the emancipatory autonomy of the "modern." The emancipatory desires of the idea of the modern, effectively co-related those of the emerging nation-state. Adopting modernism, thus, was India's way, in 1950, of inhabiting this double-bind comfortably. Or trying to.

THE MODERN INHERITANCE

Today in the post-colonial theatre, in the wake of the failure of the modern nation-state, we look for other answers. Even as we continue to inhabit the same double-bind: "Indian-modern."

The perspective that asks the question of validity of modernism in the third world from the point of view of universal ideals and local particularities, inhabits this double bind from the neo-colonial perspective where modernism is still being written as the history of the expanding West. This may be chronologically true. But chronology does not always explain history best. The minor task of the ongoing aesthetic re-adjustment of modernism, may be the task of the West. Our task, and urgency, is more ethical and political. Larger issues are at stake. We cannot afford to throw out modernism's emancipatory promises, and settle for aesthetic adjustments.

If modernism failed in India it was not because it was "Western," or that it relied on universal ideals. It failed because it relied on the

methodology that an enlightened elite could lead the rest of the populace simply on the strength of symbolic demonstration. The people were never involved; nor did they understand modernism; nor did they care. It also failed because modernism, as an economic theory, relied on scientific principles that have been proven to be wrong, not only in India, but everywhere. It failed because its proponents felt they could ignore traditional knowledges because their own were better. They were wrong. The feminist and more importantly the environmental movements have shown us that traditional knowledges are very often not only useful and relevant but may even be critical to our survival.

Rethinking modernism thus cannot be done through a palliative ethno-aestheticism, such as a "critical regionalism." Because the problem was not fundamentally aesthetic, i.e., the problem was not that of lack of *translation* of idiom – people accept the foreign quite easily as one's own, if it is useful and beneficial to them. Rather the problem was the failure of the strategies of the modern Indian nation state, i.e., the problem was the lack of *transfer* of idiom – the large masses of the people were not involved. Modernism came top down. Although heroic, it proved to be only palliative. We have, therefore to re-think *modernism, its successes and failures, as fundamentally inter-woven with the larger political and ethical textile of the nation-state and its subjects.*

Instead of producing a complete preemptive manifesto for a "post-colonial modernism," I will here attempt the relatively minor task of re-writing the history of modernism as *our* history. My case history is that of the Open Hand monument, designed by Le Corbusier, and eventually erected in the Capitol in 1983 – as representative of the Nehruvian's State's use of modernism for its own progressive symbolism that is also intrinsically caught, and trapped, in the real-politics of that same nation-state – an effect of regional disputes connected with the economic and political symbolism of Bhakra Dam.

THE OPEN HAND MONUMENT ON THE BHAKRA NANGAL DAM: A CASE HISTORY

As is well known, the Open Hand Monument was something of an obsession with Le Corbusier. It meant many things to him, and by the end of his life he considered it to be one of the most important symbols that he had created. He proposed that the Hand be erected in two places: in the Capitol at Chandigarh, and atop Bhakra Nangal Dam, about 100 miles from Chandigarh. In long and frequent letters Le Corbusier repeatedly beseeched his mentor, Jawaharlal Nehru, to have these Hands erected. Nehru was a great supporter of Le Corbusier and indeed one can read in the latter's intellectual agenda for the Open Hand – as the symbol of the "Second Machine Civilization" – ideas that are not that far from the former's conceptions of the new third world, expemplified in the ideals of the Non-Aligned Movement. The Non-Aligned Movement represented the aspirations of a world which sought self determination, in a way that it did not necessarily have to subscribe to the factions of power blocs in international politics. It represented an unfactionalized approach, a desire to be unaffiliated to the superpower of world politics. This desire constituted a third alternative – the idea of the "Third World" – a mediation and transformation of both capitalism and communism. To drive out the best of both the alternatives in a combination which also merged them to make a third alternative, which would be free from the ills of both. Non-alignment was to accrue the benefits of industrial revolution in the capitalist markets along with the ideals of communist equal distribution.

This sense of the Non-aligned movement as a Third World is equivalent to the aspiration which Le Corbusier had for the "Second Machine Civilization" in which the technology of capitalism combined with the socialist, broadly speaking, the aspirations of the Second World, to result the free flow of consumer goods, "which is the ineluctable destiny of the mechanical civilization which today,

making use of its machines in a dangerous way, forgets that its open hand shall be filled with consumer goods" (Marg - The Master Plan) – an era of prosperity brought by the use of machine such that its goods are equally distributed. "Open to receive the newly created, wealth, open to distribute it to its people and to others." The symbol and sign for this promise was the Open Hand, "The Open Hand will assert that the second era of the machine age has begun: the era of harmony" (Kalia 117).

Nehru, however, ignored most of Le Corbusier's letters, and, finally, on June 8, 1958 he wrote back decidedly:

As for your proposal of "The Open Hand" to be put up as a symbol, just at present we are in such a difficult financial position that we have stopped any kind of work that is not considered inescapable. I can very well understand your enthusiasm and your disappointment at any delay in realizing your conception. But, there are so many matters pressing in upon us that we are compelled to delay many things that we might otherwise do.

Le Corbusier pointed out that the cost of the Hand was merely a fraction of the general building costs, but to no avail. The correspondence continued into the mid-1960s, but the Hand was not constructed in Le Corbusier's or Nehru's lifetime; and the reasons were not financial.

Le Corbusier's Open Hand at Chandigarh has a lesser known twin – one that he proposed atop the Bhakra Nangal Dam. Le Corbusier was asked to propose an aesthetic plan for Bhakra Nangal Dam in the mid-1950s. Imparting a specific aesthetic form to Bhakra was important for Nehru because along with being an instrument of economic re-structuring, Bhakra was intended to be part of the new symbol vocabulary signifying the aspirations of the post-independent Nehruvian nation state. As "the highest straight gravity dam in the world," the highest dam in Asia, and the nations largest hydro-electrical power reservoir, Bhakra was the symbol of a future that was to be delivered by technology. In this new Nehruvian syntax, the hydro-electric dams were to be "the temples of modern India."

In the 1959 edition of *L'Art decoratif d'aujourd'hui* he describes his impression of this enduring vision. Nehru, Le Corbusier reported, asked him to design the "architectural fate" of that "gigantic work of technology." He found what had been erected so satisfactory that he chose not to give undue importance to the architectural features as the Bhakra dam itself [was] a very powerful structure which should dominate the environment. Instead, Le Corbusier proposed to just add rudimentary additions, like a walkway for visitors, and then place the Open Hand on Bhakra as "a crowning feature." As such, the Open Hand was intended as the symbol of fascinations attached with Bhakra. The Open Hand was to be the symbol of Nehru's vision of equal distribution of the economic benefits of the expansive agriculture development, and Bhakra was the instrument and of this image.

Such were the *affects* of Bhakra. Bhakra was the primary instrument of the of Nehru's expansive irrigation reforms through canals, because it was the largest dam of this enterprise. As such, Nehru wanted it to also be the symbol and sign of this endeavor, as the primary "temple of modern India." The making of Chandigarh was also the part of this game.

The larger *affects* of Bhakra were quite different. Nehru strongly opposed the development of the demands of provincial autonomy in Punjab on the basis of linguistic criterion. He feared that the solution of regional grievances if promoted on the criterion of autonomy, even if it dwelled on linguistic boundaries, could be exploited into separatist demands of autonomy. Therefore, against the demand for Punjabi Suba, he initiated greater emphasis on the provincial development of Punjab as a symbol and representation of investment in the nation state. This development was only initiated in the agriculture sector since Punjab was perceived to have a traditional agriculture set up through the natural flow of rivers, Ravi and Sutluj. This

traditional set up of agriculture, however was only limited to the central tract of the province, which had abundant rainfall in the monsoons. Water through private wells was the traditional method of irrigation in the regions away from the flow of the rivers. Agriculture development was promoted by expansion of the agriculture land by the development of the irrigation system beyond the national resources. This was done by constructing a network of canals which carried water to the south and southeastern tracts of the new Punjab (In 1956, nine years after the partition of Punjab, the boundaries of the truncated Punjab were once again altered with the incorporation of Patiala and PEPSU, East Punjab State Union. This was conceived as a measure that would pacify the demand of Punjabi Suba). These regions had lower rainfalls and large desert areas.

This logic of the early Nehruvian nation state worked in the image of a perfect ideal of democratic egalitarian distribution of national resources. This seemed to suggest the solution to take the canals to all the arid areas, so the whole state would be mapped by an equal grid of economic distribution. "Irrigate the deserts" became the metaphor of this operation. In this sense, this grid annexed the preceding colonial grids of "classification" and chronological history. This annexation however, constitutes a strange instance of epistemic violence – a double bind. Its violence is one that which we cannot not ascribe to, i.e., it assumes all people to be equal. It is violence inasmuch as it suppresses the inevitability of "real" economic, political, and religious identity based differences.

Nehruvian agriculture expansion crossed over a complex web of inherited colonial ethnic distribution, and political representation sought and claimed on similar grounds. As a result, instead of subsiding the demand of Punjabi Suba, the large canal projects further aroused political exploitation of claimed grievances of unequal economic distribution. These large canal projects were claimed to primarily benefit the southern and the eastern tracts of the province which had relatively lower rainfall. The cost of the projects, however, was predominantly borne by the central farmers, whose land revenue assessments were higher because of higher cropping densities and greater acreage in market crops. Furthermore, the drainage of the central region was seriously disrupted by the canals, whose raised banks inevitably caused flooding on their upstream side during the rainy season. Consequently, this caused widespread loss of cropland in the 1960s. As a compensation for the central farmers, the government aided the development of private wells which were of no benefits to either the mountainous or the southern tracts. The government of Punjab, which had substantial majority of representatives from the regions outside the central tracts, proved itself unable to reconcile with conflicting sets of needs. These claims of subservient economic benefits raised the claim for a "Punjabi Suba" as the political form for the central area and, then, for "Haryana" as the complementary political identity in the south.

The canal dispute encompasses more complex political attributes than just a narrative of economic stratification. The effects of the large canal projects were exploited as regional grievances both as claims of subservient economic returns as well as ethnic prejudices. In the 1965 drought, the state of Punjab was declared a "food zone." The farmers were restricted to move and sell their crops outside the designated areas. This restriction prevented the individual farmers to reach the markets of high demand. This step was intended to control the inflation in grain prices that could have resulted by the drought. This measure, however was projected on grounds of ethnic and religious bias, as the impeachment of the rights of the rural population of the central and northern tracts of Punjab, comprising mostly of the Sikh farmers. Since these farmers did not rely on the canals for irrigation, which were immediately effected by the drought, and instead drew water from private wells, they perceived this setup as an ample opportunity to exploit their advantages to reap substantial economic benefits. But, the implementation of the food zones prevented them to sell their produce in response to the inflation of high demands of foodgrain in agricultural markets. The egalitarian

measures of the central government could not account for the demand and supply logic at play. These measures were seen as intolerance toward the religious identity of the Sikh farmers who could have potentially gained larger profits if the central government had favored their prosperity.

Nehru's letter to Le Corbusier spoke of the "so many matters pressing in upon us that we are compelled to delay many things that we might otherwise do." In the above I have tried to trace out the broad textile that is made of these "pressing matters." Under the circumstances, the erection of the Open Hand was just not apposite – nor really for financial reasons and certainly not for reasons of lack of cultural translation. On the contrary, the Open Hand could not be built precisely because it would be understood too well – as the blighted crown atop a temple that was clearly no longer in grace.

This would also explain why Bhakra Open Hand, by the mid-1960s had become a popular joke amongst the architects of Chandigarh – as the Open Hand of the traffic policeman held up to stop the flow of Bhakra's waters.

NOTES

- ¹ G.C. Spivak, "City Country Agency," *Theatres of Decolonization Proceedings*, ed. Vikramaditya Prakash, (Seattle WA: Office of the Dean, College of Architecture and Urban Planning, 1997).
- ² Vikramaditya Prakash, "Inscribing Architecture," unpublished paper.

REFERENCES

- Correa, Charles. "Chandigarh: The View from Benares," in *Le Corbusier*, ed. by H. Allen Brooks. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, pp.197-202.
- Berman, Marshall. *All that is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982.
- Chakravarty, Suhash. "Architecture and Politics in the Construction of New Delhi," *Architecture + Design*, Vol.II, No.2 (Jan-Feb, 1986): pp.76-93.
- Curtis, William J.R. *Modern Architecture since 1900* Oxford: Phaidon, 1982.
- _____. *Le Corbusier: Ideas and Forms*. New York: Rizzoli, 1986.
- _____. "L'ancien dans le moderne," *Architecture En Inde*. Saint-Gobain, France: Electa Manteur, 1985.
- Evenson, Norma. *Chandigarh*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1966.
- Fry, Maxwell. "Le Corbusier at Chandigarh," *The Open Hand: Essays on Le Corbusier*, ed. Russell Walden. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1977, pp.350-63.
- Jeanneret, Charles-Edouard. *Journey to the East*, English translation by Ivan Zaknic. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1977.
- _____. *Voyage d'Orient Carnets*. New York: Electa Rizzoli, 1988.
- Kalia, Ravi. *Chandigarh: In Search of an Identity*. Carbondale and Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987.
- LaCapra, Dominick. *History, Politics and the Novel*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987.
- Le Corbusier. *Towards a New Architecture*, translated by Frederick Etchells. New York: Praeger Publishers, Inc., 1960.
- _____. "The Master Plan," *Marg*, Vol. XV (December 1961): pp.5-19.
- _____. *Oeuvre Complete 1957-1965*, ed. by Willy Boesiger, English translation by William B. Gleckman. Zurich: Verlag fur Architektur (Artemis), 1965.
- _____. *Last Works*, ed. by Willy Boesiger, English translation by Henry A. Frey. London: Thames and Hudson, 1970.
- _____. *Le Corbusier Sketchbooks Vol. 1-4*. New York: The Architectural History Foundation; Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press; in collaboration with the Fondation Le Corbusier, Paris, 1981.
- _____. *Le Corbusier Archives Vol. I-XXXII*. New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc.; and the Fondation Le Corbusier, Paris, 1983.
- _____. *The City of Tomorrow*, translated by Frederick Etchells. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1986.
- Moos, Stanislaus von. "The Politics of the Open Hand: Notes on Le Corbusier and Nehru at Chandigarh," *The Open Hand: Essay's on Le Corbusier*, ed. Russell Walden. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1977, pp. 412-57.

- _____. *Le Corbusier, Elements of a Synthesis*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1985.
- Nehru, Jawaharlal. "Mr. Nehru on Architecture," *Urban and Rural Planning Thought* Vol.2.2 (April 1959): 46-49.
- Nilsson, Sten. *The New Capitals of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh*. Lund, Sweden: Studentlitteratur, 1973.
- Pandit, Sneh. *Chandigarh*. Chandigarh: Sterling Printers, 1969.
- Petit, Jean. *Le Corbusier lui-meme*. Geneva: Rousseau, 1970.
- Prakash, Aditya, *Chandigarh: A Presentation in Free Verse*. Chandigarh: Chandigarh Administration, 1980(?).
- _____. *Reflections on Chandigarh*. New Delhi: Navyug Traders, 1983.
- Prasad, Susand. "Le Corbusier in India," *Architecture + Design* Vol.III, No.6 (Sept-Oct 1987): 14-19.
- Rowe, Colin. *The Mathematics of an Ideal Villa and Other Essays*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1985.
- Spivak, Gayatri C. "City Country Agency," *Proceedings of the Theatres of Decolonization*. Seattle, 1997.
- Sarin, Madhu. *Urban Planning in the Third World: The Chandigarh Experience*. London: Mansell Publishing Limited, 1982.
- Serenyi, Peter. "Timeless but of its Time: Le Corbusier's Architecture in India," *Le Corbusier*, ed. by H. Allen Brooks. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987.