

A part of Chandigarh in Zurich

For me, Corbusier was da Vinci of his age. Link up with the Swiss, value the master's heritage

MANOHAR SINGH GILL

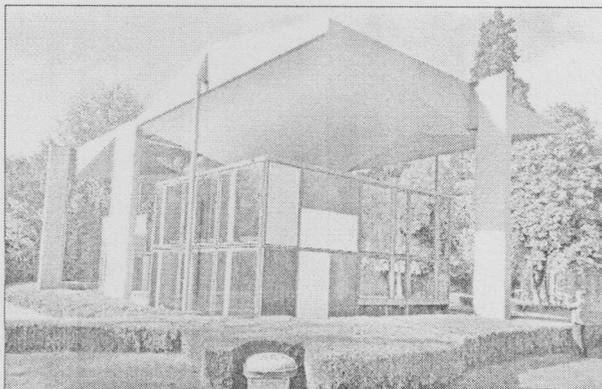
THE foundation of the new Punjab capital, Chandigarh, was laid in 1952 by Prime Minister Nehru. I was pursuing my MA from Government College, Ludhiana, and travelled for the first time to Chandigarh in 1956. Panjab University, under Dr Joshi, had moved from Solan to a few administrative buildings on the Chandigarh campus. The putative city was a dusty plain, crisscrossed by newly-built roads.

The bus stand was rudimentary and oddly, the Punjab government was functioning from barracks, near the site where PGI would later come up. Chief Minister Partap Singh Kairon had forced the Punjab government to shift from the comfort of Shimla to the dust of Chandigarh plain, for he knew that the only way to push construction was to force the ministers and civil servants to sit there. Today, sadly, Nehru is talked of, not Kairon. The truth is that without his energy, Chandigarh would have dribbled in the dust for many, many long days.

In 1959, I joined the Punjab government as an IAS officer. We lived in tents in Sector 21, learning revenue land-mapping work from *patuwaris*. I saw the Secretariat, the High Court and the Vidhan Sabha slowly come up. A keen photographer, I took shots of poor Rajasthani labourers carrying *tokris* up wooden ramps to pour concrete. I was fascinated by the elegance and the colour of the cheap *saris* the women wore. The architecture of the buildings filled us with wonder; the bold blue and red colours on doors of the new housing shocked us. Till then, we had known only the Victorian architecture and the use of white and grey. Corbusier's (Corbu is how we referred to him) strange monuments and hills in the Capitol mystified me.

We cycled everywhere, even to the new Secretariat. The ramp on which you could easily walk up to the 10th floor was a new feature for us. The Chief Secretary, Mangat Rai, ICS, always walked up the ramp. Nehru came on frequent visits, as he was fascinated by the new India, of Chandigarh and the Bhakra Dam, where too concrete was being poured round the clock by Punjab PWD engineers. New temples of India, he called them.

Corbusier came to Chandigarh on fre-



The Centre Le Corbusier or Heidi Weber Museum in Zurich. PHOTO BY THE WRITER

quent visits, from Paris. He was involved in many projects around the world and was already recognised as perhaps the greatest town planner and architect of the century. His talents were many; sketches, paintings, tapestries for the High Court and Vidhan Sabha, and the great metal swing door that opened from the Vidhan Sabha to the High Court. Can I call him the da Vinci of the age?

His cousin Jeanneret lived in one of the new houses near the lake gate and supervised the construction. He also designed housing and furniture. I had the honour to have a drink with him on a few occasions, as I sat on his impossible chair, with the backrest made of a crisscross of ropes as thick as a finger! A few of these chairs, I understand, have again been stolen. Anything to do with Chandigarh is valued in the West, but still not so back home.

I happened to be in Zurich this August-September when Chandigarh and the world remembered him, on the 50 years of his passing away — he drowned at the French Riviera in August, 1965.

I have been going to Zurich for 20 years to visit my daughter. In the Saturday market, I could still pick up a few books on Corbusier, of course in French; the lady selling them smiled and gave me a concession when I said I was from Corbusier's Chandigarh. The 10 Franc note has his portrait on the front, and the Chandigarh Secretariat on the back. I feel proud every time I use the 10 Franc,

though I am embarrassed to admit that I was ignorant of a Corbusier designed memorial to his own work, right there under my nose, on a lawn by the lake. I think Chandigarh's citizens, and the UT Administration, are ignorant of this fact.

The story goes like this. In 1958, a young woman named Heidi Weber came across Corbusier's seating furniture, which he had designed in 1927, in a book. She was fascinated and asked his permission to produce this furniture. He agreed and she opened her first sales exhibition of his furniture in 1959. She began to put up his oil paintings, sculptures and tapestries also on sale. She dreamt of displaying all his multiple talents in a house designed by Corbusier himself. He was sceptical, but offered to design her house. She refused. She explained that if she lived in a Corbusier house, hundreds would come daily to see it, and she would have no privacy!

She wanted a small Corbusier museum, designed by him, and began to pester the Zurich City Council for a plot. They were hesitant, but ultimately, the President, Dr M Landolt, gave her an ideal plot, in a park near Zurichhorn, by the lake. Corbusier and his assistants in Paris helped her with designs. In 1961, he gave her the first plans, and in 1962, the Zurich council approved them. In later years, Corbusier improved his design repeatedly. The construction started in 1964. Throughout 1965, Cor-

busier and his assistants worked tirelessly to improve the building plans, which were now almost entirely in steel.

In July, 1965, Heidi travelled to Paris with some Swiss engineers for two intensive days of discussions with his team on the technicalities of steel construction. His ideas were far ahead of contemporary engineering, and he once caustically remarked to a Swiss steel engineer, "You and your thinking obviously got stuck in the era of the Eiffel Tower!" The Swiss company that was to do the steel work refused responsibility for the static calculations. Finally, Corbusier's engineer from Paris, Monsieur Fruitet, accepted the job. Corbusier was miles ahead of the best men of his time.

Sadly, in August, the announcement of his death shook the world. I was Deputy Commissioner, Ambala, at that time. As I recall, Chandigarh and all of us took no notice of this tragic loss. Closely associated with *The Tribune*, I do not recall anything in the paper either!

Heidi Weber continued to have difficulties with the council in Zurich, but her memorial was completed and inaugurated on July 16, 1967. Heidi still lives in Zurich. I tried, but could not meet her.

I, however, did see this elegant jewel of his work with the familiar dramatic colour scheme. I can only compare it to the Moti Masjid at the Red Fort. Sadly, it is locked up for the public now.

The past neglect by Chandigarh of this Corbusier art should be corrected immediately. How is it that Chandigarh is not linked with Zurich? The Mayor, along with the UT Administrator, should visit Zurich and see this memorial.

Inside the museum, I saw an exhibition on Chandigarh; a film on the city was running continuously in the basement. The clips were taken by French photographers from the time of the early buildings of Chandigarh. I felt emotional seeing Rajasthani women labourers walking on the ramps, barbers under trees, and Sikh village kids with *jurats* playing in the dust.

Chandigarh should own this memorial as much as the Capitol Complex. Invite the Zurich council chairman and a delegation and build an enduring link with Corbusier's mother city and country. After all, he is the father of Chandigarh.

The writer is a Member of Parliament