

First flower of freedom

CHANDIGARH:

Glorious tributes have been paid to Le Corbusier by many great architects of the world. The great American Architect, Louis Khan, once said, "I came to live in a beautiful city called Le Corbusier". On seeing Chandigarh in 1960, Paul Rudolph, a famous architect, remarked: "It is the only grouping of the 20th century, of which I know, that makes any sense whatsoever, undoubtedly the century's greatest".

Originally, a Polish Architect, Mathew Nowicki, had been chosen to design Chandigarh, the capital of post-independence Punjab. But his death necessitated the selection of a new architect. Faced with a stringent shortage of dollars, Mr P. N. Thapar and Mr P. L. Verma, Chief Administrator and Chief Engineer, respectively, of the capital project, were com-

On the 91st birth anniversary, today, of the creator of Chandigarh, Le Corbusier, S. S. Bhatti tells how Corbusier was chosen for the project and what he made of it.

pelled to limit their choice to soft currency areas. When they went to Paris, the French Minister of Planning recommended Le Corbusier and said the architect, though a bit controversial, was full of ideas. He also suggested that they engage Pierre Jeanneret, Corbusier's cousin, whom the Minister termed a good detail man.

Corbusier, when contacted, was intrigued but had his doubts whether the city would be built at all. This reaction was natural because many of the ambitious projects with which he had been associated were never realised. However, he signed the contract in November 1950. Pierre Jeanneret and Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew (husband and wife team) were also engaged for the project.

The challenge before Corbusier was that he had a free hand and very little money.

With his amazing creative imagination and trenchant rationale, however, he was soon to make virtue of this necessity. He exploited the three constraints of money, technology and climate to create an architecture the like of which the world had never known before. Stringent budget, primitive technology and brutal climate were, in the hands of the

master, just the right tools to shape a 'male architecture' with.

The master plan, already developed by Albert Mayer, incorporated a system of neighbourhood units, containing low-lying houses, schools, small shops and open spaces, with car and pedestrian separation, arranged in the picturesque tradition of the garden city planners. Corbusier transformed this plan, straightened out the roads, and established focal points. He imposed a scheme of traffic separation 'Les Sept Voies', the 7Vs, that he had earlier pro-

monumental building, Assembly Hall (law forming), Secretariat (law executing), and the High Court (law interpreting), are neither specifically Indian nor European. They are the product of a particular time, place and set of conditions, yet peculiarly ageless and unlimited in concept. Corbusier has used his Le Modulor in the sitting and proportioning of these buildings. Modulor is a system of dimensions based on "the human body and mathematics". According to Albert Einstein it makes the good easy and the bad difficult.

Chandigarh continues to be criticised by all and sundry because it is always viewed as an isolated phenomenon. It is too clinical, too extravagant, and even too impertinent because it 'monumentalises' the much too self-conscious genius of one man: Le Corbusier. Criticism is welcome but irresponsible opinionation such as this is both irrelevant and inhuman. This is not to suggest that Chandigarh is without faults. What is suggested is that these faults should be seen as part of the great experiment that Chandigarh has been.



Le Corbusier

posed for Bogota and Marseilles. The 7Vs represent an attempt to establish a hierarchy of traffic circulation, ranging from the arterial roads, V1; major boulevards, V2; through the sector-definers V3; the shopping street, V4; to sector streets giving access to houses, V5 and V6; and pedestrian paths, V7.

Corbusier was not, however, greatly involved with the detailed planning of the city nor with the building of houses. These he left to Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew, and more particularly to Pierre Jeanneret who also supervised the construction of the buildings. Le Corbusier focussed his attention rather on the central business district (Sector 17) and, more especially, on the Capitol Complex. The Capitol became the epoch-making culmination of Corbusier's chequered career. These

How can we forget that at the time Chandigarh was conceived, India was a new nation; poor, technically undeveloped and politically divided. She needed symbols of power and permanence as the expression of that eternal need of people to create monuments for their religious beliefs and social convictions; their activities and aspirations. Chandigarh was, indeed, projected as "a new town, symbolic of the freedom of India, unfettered by the traditions of the past an expression of the nation's faith in the future", and built on a site "free from the existing encumbrances of old towns and old traditions the first large expression of our creative genius flowering on our newly earned freedom."

It goes to the credit of Le Corbusier that with his unwavering self-confidence, universal vision and obstinate belief in the essential seriousness of architecture, he has successfully placed India on the world map of modern architecture. Chandigarh has virtually become a place of pilgrimage (a Mecca) for his admirers all over the world as well as all those who have anything to do with architecture, planning and civic design.