

# Nek Chand's Rock Garden and Le Corbusier in Chandigarh: reconsidering the primitive

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This paper is concerned with two personalities, Le Corbusier and Nek Chand, occupying, as it would appear, the extreme polarities of the creative spectrum, yet sharing the same geographic space of artistic production. Following India's independence in 1947, and the untimely death of Matthew Nowicki that marked the demise of the Mayer-Nowicki plan, Le Corbusier was invited by the first Indian Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru to design Chandigarh, a city which was to act as the new capital city of the partitioned state of Punjab. Nek Chand - a self-taught sculptor - who began life as a road inspector in Chandigarh at a time when the city was being built, constructed the Rock Garden in Chandigarh - initially illegally and as a private hobby - out of found natural rocks and the fragmented remains of the villages that once occupied the site of Chandigarh. The Garden set within 18 acres of modified landscape and ceramic-clad terrain, exists at the edge of Chandigarh's Capitol Complex and consists of over 3000 sculptures and architectural follies. It was discovered in 1972 and eventually legalised in 1976. The garden is still under development and continues to receive around 2000 visitors each day. In spite of their widely differing backgrounds - Le Corbusier, already a world renowned architect, well-travelled and widely read, and Nek Chand, a migrant from what is now the Pakistani part of Punjab, a road inspector and a self-taught sculptor of limited education and experience - the Capitol Complex and the Rock Garden share a common ground of aesthetics. As we explore and argue in this paper, arriving from the opposite ends of the artistic horizon, their shared aesthetics is characterised by a broad negation of the classical and modernist normative aesthetic tradition and vocabulary and the embracing of primitivism, a fascination with the grotesque and the unfinished, and a tendency to treat the identifiable components of the tectonics as elements of the aesthetic. Such an implicit questioning, we argue, has been a key characteristic of avant-garde art movements from the early-twentieth century. The two personalities enter the common critical territory from two distinct directions; while Chandigarh is the result of a significant shift away from Le Corbusier's pre-war approach, that also made the chapel at Ronchamp possible, Nek Chand began life as a self-taught 'Outsider Artist', whose work was 'institutionalised' by post-independence Indian politics.

It is important to stress from the outset that the aim here is not to 'compare and contrast' the two creative outputs. There are, of course, many areas where Le Corbusier has received criticism (some of which we have discussed elsewhere Jackson 2003; Bandyopadhyay and Jackson 2007), and Nek Chand's work has been positioned as an involuntary critique of Le Corbusier's Chandigarh (Prakash 2002; Jackson 2003) however, the aim here is more delicate. It is the areas of overlap and the *superimposition* of the creative processes of Le Corbusier and Nek Chand that will be discussed, beginning with the natural rock collections and Le Corbusier's sketches, before considering the larger built fabric. The Rock Garden is almost as old as the city of Chandigarh; the first objects were gathered around 1958, a year before the city Edict was published. It has developed alongside the city, integrally part of it and fabricated using the same materials, yet remaining distinct and peripheral. Leah Ulansey in her review of Peter Burger's much celebrated work, 'Theory of the Avant-Garde', suggests that Burger managed to recast, '... in the form of general theory of art some of the Avant-Garde's specific concerns ... : 1) the role of engagement (political commitment) of art; and 2) the self-critique of art as an institution and the problematization of art's claim to autonomy, a claim ... finding its apex in 19<sup>th</sup> century Aestheticism' (Ulansey 1984: 1192). We suggest that the latent avant-gardism in Le Corbusier's late work and the 'Outsider Artist' in Nek Chand, arriving from two opposed directions, equally display political commitment and above all, question some of the established notions of aesthetics.

**Key Words:** Le Corbusier, outsider art, Nek Chand, postcolonial Indian architecture, Chandigarh

**T**he work of Le Corbusier post-WWII began to take a different path. Whilst still retaining a fascination with the machine and aspects of the scientific and mathematical in his architectural thought and representation - a passion that underpinned the development of Purism (with Ozenfant)<sup>1</sup> and coloured his artistic and architectural works and urban speculations of the 1920s and 1930s - his later work showed an interest in the grotesque, the primitive and the unfinished. One could clearly detect the effect his brief foray into the world of avant-garde arts - Cubism, Dadaism and Surrealism - had had on his creative psyche, even though, arguably, much of this influence might have contributed to the development of an aesthetic that

'preserved appearances' of a perfect alchemical fusion between the opposition of mathematical precision and artistic creation.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps equally important were his many voyages, often through, what established Western experience would have regarded as, 'primitive' societies.

Le Corbusier's theatrical entry into the field of Indian architecture - until then dominated by neo-classicism, a style which found its staunch patrons amongst the colonial rulers - ushered in a flamboyant and vibrant brand of modernism, and paradoxically, had an lasting effect approximating the avant-garde movements of the early-twentieth century. The colonial normative aesthetics was cast aside in favour of the new and a very specific (and even personal and contentious) vocabulary of modernism. Influences arrived from all directions - from ancient and classical Indian sources, the timeless spatiality of the villages, and the world of the impoverished urban dwellers. While it will be difficult to claim that Le Corbusier's work displayed an overt political commitment, or questioned the institutional character of Indian architecture, or for that matter, questioned art's autonomous status, it is certainly possible to argue that his work in Chandigarh and Ahmedabad implicitly questions the content, quality and status of colonial architecture, as well as, reappraises its own role within the fast-evolving post-Independence scenario.

### **The institutionalisation of 'outsider art'**

Nek Chand's arrival on Chandigarh stage happens from an entirely opposed direction. His work at the Rock Garden has often been categorised as 'Outsider Art', a term first coined by the art critic Roger Cardinal in 1972 to closely mirror - albeit with a much broader connotation - a category first articulated in the late-1940s by the French artist and collector, Dubuffet as 'Art Brut'. Nek Chand's rock garden began as a private hobby, working during the day as an inspector of roadworks in the Public Works Department of the newly established and expanding city, and passionately pursuing his hobby in his spare time and during the evenings. Initially, this private world began to take shape surreptitiously and illegally with the bestial and anthropomorphic rocks and other objects Nek Chand collected from the nearby rivers and ruins, which he transformed through a minimal re-contextualisation. The illegal 'Rock Garden' came to light in 1972 - by then a vast collection of rocks, objects and sculptures - and was eventually legalised following much deliberation in 1976 [figures 1-3].



Figure 1

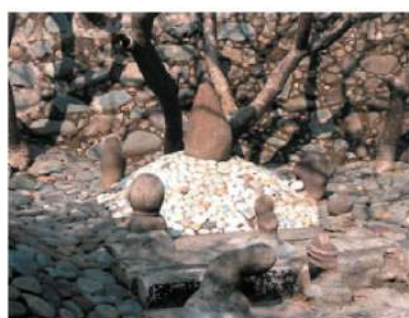


Figure 2



Figure 3

This legalisation and establishment of what is now known as Nek Chand's Rock Garden was perhaps an attempt to cling onto a newly-discovered popular icon amidst the desperate economic crisis the federal government found itself at the time. Also for the Garden itself, this was a key turning point, as legalisation, its opening up to the general public, and some financial support (or promise of it) from the city authorities led to at least a partial shift of control away from Nek Chand. Institutionalisation, therefore, has been inevitable - exacerbated later by the

huge attention apportioned by international interest in Nek Chand's life and work, as well as a result of local tourism. Such polar attention has forced both the Garden and Nek Chand to perform, as it were, under ever-increasing demand. Thus, while undeniably Nek Chand's work began its life as 'Outsider Art', and one could argue that a significant strand of that non-professional, passionate and pure engagement with artistic production continues to persist, the Garden has increasingly been subjected to institutionalising forces. A critical appreciation of the Garden, therefore, is a more complex task than ever before.

### **Complexity of the task**

The Rock Garden's location in Chandigarh, a city celebrated for its modernist architectural ensemble produced by Le Corbusier, Maxwell Fry, Jane Drew and their Indian collaborators and protégées, is significant [figure 4]. In an attempt to sever ties with the past and usher in a new and vibrant future, the first Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru had grandly proclaimed that the new city would remain 'unfettered by traditions' (Evenson 1966). While this may have been the intention, modernism's passage into India and the political mechanisms it appropriated to establish its presence - i.e., its agency, almost unquestioned reception and a near-cult following in at least the three decades following independence - effectively suggests an extension of colonial cultural politics. Within such a context, the surreptitious emergence of the Rock Garden is interesting, but also questioning of the very bases of Chandigarh's modernist conception. Elsewhere we have discussed how the Rock Garden could be seen as the 'other' Chandigarh, resulting from its contravention of many of the laws set out in Le Corbusier's edict<sup>3</sup> and the zoning principles of the city (Jackson 2003; Bandyopadhyay & Jackson 2007). Arguably, as far as the spatial arts are concerned, the Garden reflects India's slow process of decolonisation and its subsequent speedy transformation into the globalised consumerist culture of the 1990s. However, as this paper will argue, the seeds of the particular reaction to modernism can be found embedded in the high-modernist architecture itself: in the work of Le Corbusier.



Figure 4

A certain primitivism - perhaps a reaction to aspects of modernism, it has been argued - has been at work in Nek Chand's creations (e.g., in his early rock collection, sculptural forms and miniaturised huts), while a prevalence of postmodern aesthetics has also been pointed out (e.g., in his creation of facsimiles). Given the entirely self-taught nature of his work, an

argument in favour of a conscious move in one direction or the other, is questionable. Equally undeniable is the unconscious permeation of folk art traditions of Nek Chand's native Punjab and the foothills of the Himalayas, where he grew up (e.g., in his treatment of faces as masks). As the Garden expanded, the need to incorporate large-scale architecture was felt, in which the overt influence of Mughal architecture and its features were clearly visible. However, consistent with postmodern attitudes, such incorporations were purely visual and aesthetic and never inspired by any deeper historical understanding of provenance or spatial underpinning, an aspect to which we shall return later. The architecture and landscape in the later phase (Phase-3) is unequivocally theatrical, perhaps more redolent of settings of Bollywood films of the time - attested by the many inscriptions of love testimonials left behind by visitors on its stone and ceramic walls, basking in its growing popularity as a tourist destination, but also reeling under it. It is this augmented status amongst the Indian populace, far outstripping that of its host city, that allows the Garden the confidence to usurp the city itself, ingesting its Modernist iconic buildings and urban features into representations in *has relief*.

### **Aesthetics and tectonics**

Perhaps a comparison between certain aspects of the more mainstream architecture's reaction to modernism, both during its heyday in the 1950s and 1960s, but also in the postmodern phase of post-independence Indian architecture, is inevitable. Charles Correa and Balkrishna Doshi's early works (e.g., Gandhi Memorial Museum and School of Architecture, respectively, in Ahmedabad) are examples of how primitivism, especially through the simplicity and directness of use of tectonics, material and architectural features, and an interest in the traditional rural architecture posed useful counterpoints to the predominant language of the International-style modernism that pervaded the architectural scenario. More elaborate and overtly illustrative treatment of the primitive themes reappears in Correa's 'postmodern phase', associated with direct borrowings from classical Hindu and Islamic Indian traditions (e.g., Jawahar Kala Kendra, Jaipur). Falling in the realms of 'Critical Regionalism', these were conscious evocations illustrative of the numerous attempts to establish an identifiable character for the new Indian architecture; however, as to whether such moves were political or merely attempts at adding a popular visual dimension to their architecture, is debatable.

In his critique of Kenneth Frampton's widely discussed thesis, 'Critical Regionalism', Fredric Jameson highlights two key problematic aspects of the 'movement', aesthetics and tectonics, made explicit through its paradoxical and uncomfortable relationship with both postmodernism and modernism (Jameson 1997: 247-255). The first is Critical Regionalism's problematic orientation *vis à vis*, what he calls the 'virtually extinct conceptual species, an *aesthetic*'. The origin and development of the aesthetic system, Jameson reminds us, is from the mid-eighteenth to the mid-twentieth century, which 'seek, by describing the constitutive features of authentic works of art as they already exist, to suggest invariants and norms for the production of future works', and also results in the idea of 'taste' as a means of measuring what is worthwhile art. Not only does such a view of aesthetics sit uncomfortably with secular modernism, but from a postmodern perspective the 'totalizing normativity' of the traditional philosophical position of aesthetics is untenable. For example, such approaches are clearly problematic in understanding aesthetic systems falling outside the Western aesthetic perspective, as Lutyen's negative view of Indian aesthetics and its historical development would attest (Evenson 1966). A struggle to break free from such a constrictive view of aesthetics underpinned the thoughts, writings and works of some of the avant-garde movements. A tendency to question established notions of aesthetics - both Western and Indian - underscores the work of Le Corbusier and Nek Chand.

The second is the fundamental role Frampton apportions to technology in articulating the character of architecture - one directly derived from high-modernism, in which the precise material and formal articulation of the manner in which load transference through the various components of a building lends itself truthfully, directly and incontrovertibly to its aesthetic expression. This, as we now know, sits uncomfortably with much of postmodern aesthetics in architecture, where the question of the precise relationship between tectonics and aesthetics has been extensively debated. Even predating the emergence of theoretical and literary postmodernism, Le Corbusier's work in Chandigarh questions the centrality and 'truthful' employment of tectonics as the basis of architecture. Nek Chand's work does so even more overtly.

### High modernity meets subaltern

Le Corbusier along with his architect cousin, Pierre Jeanneret, began to nurture an interest in the 'primitive' and the 'grotesque', largely expressed through found natural objects. The pieces they gathered departed from the clean, engineered and geometric designs (e.g., the long held fascination with automobiles, aircraft and ball-bearings) towards the mundane, rusticated and discarded ensembles of bones, sticks and rocks. These objects were grouped under the title, 'objects of poetic delight' (Benton 2006). A similar strain of thought is also found through Le Corbusier's sketchbooks (Corbusier 1981; Corbusier 1982), where he exhibits a long-standing passion for the grotesque, as he claims, '... intuitively over the past 20 years I have evolved my figures in the direction of animal forms, vehicles of character, . . .' (LCS F24: 700).

The sketches made during Le Corbusier's visits to India were a collection of complex fragments recording hitherto un-encountered experiences, yet the incomplete nature of these recordings were replete with possibilities of connections and the opportunity of creating a new future. Collectively, these recordings provided a rich reservoir of motifs and models, which his built projects sought to either mimic or interpret. More poignantly, however, what is not often highlighted is the extreme fragmented nature of his sketchbook entries, interjected with suggestive connections and the occasional underlined emphasis on words or phrases. Of particular interest is the manner in which Le Corbusier strove assiduously to reconcile the quasi-mythical yet mathematically charged fragments of his architecture with a unique encompassing poetics, as if the latter was the resultant of a mysterious alchemic transformation of the mathematical fragments fused into a poetic whole. For example,

'force of the sign, algebraic capacity for entering into a relationship between themselves and thereby producing 1 poetic phenomenon' (LCS F24: 700)

Or,

'It is pure physics

a slash // cloud // medium cadmium red // in the morning

LC with one stroke ...

Indigo // violet // mauve (light cobalt // cadmium lemon // light cadmium red // malachite green // ore vermilion // compact opaque // to be spread on preprepared cadmium red purple background

This is the most unprecedented theoretical sky that I could imagine' (LCS E23: 694)

Or,

'reflection // +1 // [0] = | = // -1 // -2 = 8 height // the play of reflections and levels // April 11, 1952' (LCS F24: 756).

Connections - rather the space between words - were codified in symbols such as, '/', '+', '= ', etc., which, together with the emphases, created a multi-planar palimpsest of a cubist text, simultaneously evocative and finite, poetic and prosaic, suggestive of an ambiguity of multiple

meanings: The Signs! When the mind can conclude by a sign which henceforth will have for it (and for others) something like an algebraic value, then thought takes a leap forward; it has liberated a space ...' (LCS F27: 895). These also tempt us to deliberately misread the most prosaic of entries, such as a programme brief, as a poetic piece (e.g., LCS F25: 806).



Figure 5

This approach in his sketchbook entries was not accidental or a mere time-saving device, for Le Corbusier employed a similar interrupted suspense between fragments he employed in his work in Chandigarh and in Ahmedabad, many of which were indeed imbued with the simultaneous yet conflicting anthropomorphic and quasi-mythical and bestial qualities. Consider the interrupted connection between the cuboidal volume of the Assembly building (homage to rationality and modernism) and the canopy that fronts it (often interpreted as a flying bird), mediated by a series of smaller cuboidal volumes - perhaps the skyscrapers Le Corbusier never managed to build [figure 5]. Or, the pyramid and the top-lit hyperbolic shell that sit uneasily on top of the Assembly building connected by a steel gantry, the latter taller than its triple-height cuboid and surmounted by an alleged representation of the horns of the Indian bull. In an attempt to make the work universal and monumental, formal references transcend temporal and geographic boundaries verging on the chaotic, their irrational forms bearing no association with the purity of modernism or even his own earlier vocabulary of Purism and the machine aesthetics. Yet such fragments with its suspended connections form a cohesive whole, as if transformed by a strange alchemic process.

In the Chandigarh Capitol Complex obsolescence is perpetuated by an ingenious and questioning - if not subversive - employment of Modernist programme, which curiously, expands its monumentality [figure 6]. Attempting to overcome entropy, Le Corbusier's creativity lay in the equilibrium he sought between the models of the past and the monuments of the future, by exploring means of establishing reciprocity and coexistence between the 'unfinished' and the 'ruined', through complex topographic fabrications. Such approaches have been emulated by Charles Correa and the more recent generations of Indian architects. The opportunity of the unfinished manifests itself interestingly in Chandigarh, evidenced most explicitly within the ground of the Capitol complex. Reconciliation between the remnants of civilization and nature and the manner in which the ambiguity of the unfinished unfolded to provide an opportunity of the intrusion of Nek Chand's Rock Garden, a project - more popular than Chandigarh itself - that contradicts every aspect of the edict of Chandigarh.



Figure 6

Jeanneret, who had some contact with Nek Chand during his sojourn in India, also championed the 'aesthetic qualities' of these objects that could 'rival abstract art' (Jeanneret 1961) [figures 7-8]. Such objects were not 'produced' or were, in itself, conventionally accepted as artworks or objects of beauty, yet we see a rock presented on a short pedestal outside the City Art Museum designed by Le Corbusier; the found object made its way into the domain of high culture. Nek Chand has also displayed similar rocks in a very similar manner; however, these also have additional connotations beyond their outward appearance. For Nek Chand these rocks possess a life-giving potential; they are viewed as seeds of creation and aniconic representations of Shiva.



Figure 7



Figure 8

The Rock Garden was formed as a result of an extended period of gathering and collecting, not only rocks but also the remains of the villages demolished to make way for the city. The found objects were hoarded and eventually organised and assembled. Small-scale construction in the form of huts and shelters also took place, leading to larger more elaborate works [figure 9]. Nek Chand's building work prior to 1980 was predominately determined by the existing topography. He would clad the terrain and extend the natural mounds into walls to delineate space and territory. However, between 1980 and 1983 a significant building programme was undertaken that shows a departure from the landscape towards the development of free standing structures<sup>4</sup>.

Prior to this point the buildings on site originated with the functional requirement of shelter, as well as a means of signifying ownership of the surroundings. Developments in the form were influenced by economy such as reducing labour and materials. However, at this juncture we experience not only a shift in the scale of the works [from the miniature and single room

dwelling to the *grandiose* and multi-storey], but also a disdain for functional necessity [figures 10-11]. The sculpting now takes place at an urban scale and in the form of a small settlement. The works divide the garden, and are in simple terms, decorated walls. The expansion of the garden, it would seem, stems from this fascination with rock collection and the initial exchanges Nek Chand made with Pierre Jeanneret.



Figure 9



Figure 10



Figure 11

### **Nek Chand's rock collection: 'passion bordering the chaos of memories'**

With this we now turn to Nek Chand's collection of rocks and sculptural production. Very early on in Chandigarh, he had developed a passion for collecting unusually shaped rocks formed in the Himalayas, which he collected with passion and imagination. He would gather the rocks from the seasonal Sukhna Cho, Patiala Rao and Ghaggar rivers that flow through the surrounding Shivalik Hills. On an almost daily basis he would venture off into the hills on his bicycle in search of specific rocks. The riverbeds, literally made up of thousands of rocks, afforded Nek Chand the opportunity to overturn, rearrange and pick up rocks from the riverbed. He would select certain rocks according to his preference and remove them before taking them back to the edge of Chandigarh. His selection options at this point were heavily constrained by what could be carried on the back of a bicycle and the number of trips one could possibly make in a day; picking also depended on the season of the year and importantly, on the then



clandestine and threatened nature of the repository site. Rocks were selected depending on their appearance, texture, erosion, difference from previously selected rocks and whether they resembled something else, i.e., a face, person or an animal. Walter Benjamin succinctly sums up the complexity of issues traversing the mind of a passionate collector,

Every passion borders on the chaotic, but the collector's passion borders on the chaos of memories. More than that: the chance, the fate that suffuse the past before my eyes are conspicuously present in the accustomed confusion of [the collection] . . . Naturally [the collector's] existence is tied to many other things as well: to a mysterious relationship to ownership, to a relationship to objects that does not emphasise their functional, utilitarian value - that is, their usefulness - but studies and loves them as the scene, the stage, of their fate. (Benjamin 1999 reprint: 65)

For Nek Chand the problem surely was not finding the rocks to collect - since supply of such material was endless, but the method of its retrieval and most importantly, the storage and appropriate presentation of his collection. In the early collection one can discern two categories of rocks; first, the rocks found on the riverbed - mostly basalt - eroded and shaped by its environment into intricate forms, clearly suggestive of humanoid or bestial formal qualities (figure 12). Secondly, the heavier, smoother, more rounded and less eroded monoliths, often with deep penetrative incisions or apertures, suggestive perhaps of primitive amorphous life form (figure 13), and thirdly, a small number of magma-like rocks evidently shaped by volcanic activity. In addition, at some stage Nek Chand collected discarded metal slag peculiarly shaped as the molten metal made contact with the ground, perhaps a by-product of the city's development (figure 14).



Figure 12



Figure 13



Figure 14

This early material has had a poor press within the popular discussion of Nek Chand's creative endeavour, which has mainly concerned itself with the later decidedly more colourful ceramic-clad concrete sculptures. The study of the early collection, however, provides us an excellent understanding of the varied themes at the core of Nek Chand's interests as a collector and the resultant assemblages. Since storage in all cases was closely related to some form of display, it had, from the outset, important classificatory and interpretive implications. Given that Nek Chand found these rocks immediately and somewhat unambiguously suggestive of something amidst thousand such forms, the need to bring out that especial quality was integral to the act of collection and its storage. To bring out the humanoid and bestial qualities necessitated arranging the rocks on plinths, which in many cases, has had an important effect on our understanding of how the piece was formed or came into being. If we take the volcanic rocks, for instance, these appear to gush forth from the bases, its spewing lava momentarily frozen capturing the act, suggesting a stronger bond between the objects and its bases.

### **The mythic, the erotic and the primitive**

The humanoid figures, draped as it were in finery, posture elegantly and dynamically to recall some of the early Indian sculptures of dancers and celestial beings from the rock-cut caves of central India, especially from Ellora, and the *stupa* gates of Sanchi and Bharhut. The rough weather-hewn texture of the rocks give these a timeless archaic quality, helping us to make this particular connection, yet these are modern enough in their abstraction. Often presented as torsos, tempting us to complete their forms in our mind, their collective presence allude to a gallery of minstrels in gaiety. Some rock forms suggest conjoined bodies - perhaps engaged in romantic courtship or perhaps more - redolent of the erotic sculptures of the temples of Khajuraho and Konarak, highlighting a significant erotic content in the collection (figure 15) However, the erotic is not the prerogative of these more complex forms, since many of the so-

called single forms are suggestive of torsos of voluptuous female bodies. There is an abundance of phallus-like objects in the collection, projecting through the ground, underscoring a possible reading of the latter as the eternal female (figure 16). That short pillars - be these natural or man-made - were given a phallic and procreative significance is evident from the use of at least one of these as pedestal for an animal pair in coital act.



Figure 14



Figure 16

In contrast, all animal forms - except the horses, which, notwithstanding its tremendous dynamism, appear to be struggling to shake off the shackles of ossification - are suggestive of heaviness, strength and stasis. Always appearing in isolation, many of these are indeed formed

resembling the bull, bison or indeed beasts from the Jurassic age, the latter perhaps more true of the metal slag sculptures. The metal pieces, arranged in groups, bring to mind a herd of grazing primitive creatures, which have stopped and turned its heads to listen intently to the mumbling astonishment in the visitors' voices (figure 17). While the creatures represented through the stones of smoother appearance are also primitive in form with characteristic slowness, these appear to be amphibious beings or even creatures of the watery abyss. The deep holes present in these rocks appear as apertures to its inner depths, as if the soul will issue forth bringing with it the nature of the being itself. While often suggestive of a dominant form, many of Nek Chand's rocks offer the opportunity of multiple reading indicating an inherent ambiguity in the collected pieces, as is the case with the diminutive figure expected to be read as the decapitated body of a bull or a rhinoceros. Turned through ninety degrees it could be read as a muscular male torso with his navel clearly visible or even a male face, indicating the close and interchangeable relationship that exists between the beast and the humanoid. This close relationship between the two life forms and the conjoined primitivity is carried through into some of the early sculptures Nek Chand produced (figure 18). Unexpectedly, thus, we stumble across strange parallels between Le Corbusier's fascination with the primitive, the primordial and the grotesque and Nek Chand's collection of rocks. Perhaps certain aspects of Corbusian modernism, also manifested in his interest in the cosmogonic and the mythic, were not so distanced, after all.



Figure 17



Figure 18

## Building as ornament

It was a desire to continue building beyond the *functional* requirements of the Rock Garden that led to the apparently superfluous structures and the embellishment of buildings, to an extent that the *ornament* extended beyond the function of the structures. Whereas Le Corbusier developed his ideas through the sketchbook, Nek Chand built his ideas, often rebuilding the same forms and types in different areas of the garden to test different ideas and versions. The 'trial and error' approach and the retention of previous renditions embellished the garden through the accumulation of built forms.



Figure 19

The ornamentation, however, does not take the form of applied decoration or superficial additions to the façades, but manifests itself through spatial constructs. Entirely superfluous rooms, staircases and colonnades are constructed alongside the 'functional' aspects, which in some cases is simply a dividing wall [figure 19]. This approach has created a situation where structures appear to have very little purpose, and are perhaps perceived as unnecessary. Whilst the functionalist agenda was rejected by even the most hard-line modernists (Benton 2006, 155), Nek Chand's approach certainly exceeds the boundaries of such transgression set within modernism, and proved irksome to many Chandigarh residents wedded to the purity of modernism (See Chauhan 03/09/1994; Saxena 1995/11/18). In building beyond the practical, there is an elaborate or flamboyant rambling within the architecture of the garden. The narrow view of what may be considered functional is called into question with the adornment of these spaces and structures, as is the convention that buildings must be *used* and should be 'fit for purpose'. The modernist (and capitalist) drive for a minimum existence, greater efficiency and miserly appreciation of extravagance is overturned by Nek Chand's *requirement* for the excessive. Construction is something rarely undertaken for fun, yet free from any external restraints it is undertaken at the Rock Garden for pleasure, with a function occasionally included as justification for those who question the motives.

In some cases the redundant buildings have attracted new uses; however, these practical adoptions were not intended and the structures were not 'designed' with any predetermined application. As a result, the spaces don't quite align with their new roles, there are spatial overlaps, inadequacies and leftovers and the buildings typologies remain disparate from their functions and inevitably, modifications or compromises ensue. This effect is forced within the Rock Garden and the result is an impression that the buildings were used for some other purpose (creating the feeling they existed *before* the Rock Garden). The effect adds to the notion of ruin

and heightens the 'otherness' and alienation of particular forms when presented outside of a historical context. The construction of the huts and shelters was originally secondary to, and resulting from the remaking of the ruined objects from the demolished villages. However, from 1980 onwards, the construction of shelters takes on an equally important role as the production of sculptures. The building is no longer just a shelter but is to be viewed for its aesthetics, built for no other reason other than to serve as an artefact in its own right.

The following sections describe some of the *theatrical* spatial compositions found in the Rock Garden, that arguably stem from, or are influenced in part from the Corbusian landscape and embellishments of Sector-1.



Figure 20



Figure 21

### **Ravine**

After passing through the courtyard of Nek Chand's first hut a large ravine is entered, its walls clad with overlapping rocks [figure 20]. At the midpoint a small cascade of water runs down the surface of the rocks and flows down a gully. It leads the way towards the first grotto [figure 21]. The open and 'horizontal' spaces that precede this corridor-like passage are fully open to

the sky and sunlight, yet this space is in permanent shadow where emphasis is on the verticality of the walls. The rocks protrude out from the surface making the passage difficult to pass through - it slows the visitor down as every step has to be taken with care.

Entry into the grotto is restricted by the vegetation covering its entrance and the pool of water that swells in front of the threshold before disappearing under the terrain. The markings on the stones that form the entrance imply significance and possibly, occupation. The rocks that line the ravine are placed to give the appearance of being natural. Yet upon closer inspection we see that these rocks have been deliberately positioned and placed to create troughs and furrows. Small recesses imply nests and natural habitats and the narrowing passage creates an uncomfortable feeling of vulnerability and potential for entrapment. Although not fully articulated, the rock features embedded in the walls are suggestive of grand narratives consisting of numerous characters and narrative strands. These recall *Gangavatarana*, the celebrated rock carving of a grand narrative on the hill face near Chennai in Tamilnadu, depicting the penance of Arjuna in Mahabharata as retold by an early Tamil poet, weaving in myriad strands of celestial and terrestrial narratives. An exit from the ravine is made through a brightly illuminated room [figure 22]. The mass of rocks above the opening seems to crush the space and the rocks directly above the opening resemble faces, skulls and fossils.



Figure 22

### **Synthetic roots: "beauty and the beast"**

The tight, domestic and introverted spaces open up after the ravine into a large scenographic composition [figure 23]. The visitor is no longer an explorer investigating the intimate and concealed niches and is suddenly an observer as well as rendered part of the stage set. After the tangible and close range of the natural rocks, the visitor is now distanced from the perimeter walls, and the scale shifts from the miniature details of the repeated stones to perspectival views and multitudinous components. The main focus of this space is the waterfall structure [figure 24], which is topped with an arcade and three *chhatris*. The waterfall creates a paradisiacal feel,

it has romantic associations and generally waterfalls are associated with the mythical and sites of spiritual importance. The Hindu faith sites Shiva's hair as being a waterfall, while the deity's presence is represented in the garden both the aniconic *lingam* and figurative sculpting.



Figure 23



Figure 24



Opposite the waterfall, however, a different arrangement of structures is found. A series of semi-enclosed spaces are located besides large armatures that seem to be grappling round the top of the parapet wall [figures 25-26]. When compared to the waterfall ensemble, the structure is clumsy, with exaggerated columns, and composite forms that appear to be without unity and lacking distinct relationships between the component parts. This cannot be due to the design methods of Nek Chand - that is, his incremental approach to building - because opposite we see a coherent method and carefully considered arrangement of structures articulated through hierarchy and material clarity. These structures have been deliberately formed in this manner, and we must assume, with the same degree of care and control as the waterfall and ravine.



Figure 25



Figure 26

In this arrangement of structures we see the mimicking of nature as well as the deliberate encasing of a tree that has now begun to penetrate the wall and destructively break open the fabric Nek Chand has positioned around it. The unfinished and ruptured forms are deliberately set against the refined, clearly identifiable typologies and manicured historical representations.

The 'natural' and 'organic' has been cited within architectural fabric throughout the ages, yet a manipulation or *disfigurement* of the natural to create a hybrid or monstrous new species is not generally found. The structures that accompany the mock-natural are also deviating from recognisable architectural typologies. Whilst we can recognise the hut/dwelling, the amphitheatre, *chhatris* and to a great extent the fortified castles/palaces purely from their form, these structures are *peculiar* in the sense that they give no clues as to how they might be used and by whom. Of course, we are thinking purely in a practical sense here, but even the sham-ruins of 18<sup>th</sup> Century Britain utilised a distinctive and recognisable form/style to communicate a politic or ambition (e.g., the Gothic castle/church). New forms, without a clear historical precedent force the viewer to ponder this ambiguity, as we search for the familiar longing to lessen the ambiguity of the form. Le Corbusier's forms of Sector-1 produce similar effects; the forms are not overtly invoking past typologies, rather it is the scale of the works that induces significance.

### **Bulbous growths**

The works in the Rock Garden departed from the 'found', 'domestic' and miniature, towards large-scale impositions, completely independent of the existing terrain and without functional demands.



Figure 27



Figure 28

The large waterfall at the gateway to Phase-3 is split into three parts; the tallest section contains the water tanks and a series of *ofchhatris* adorn the canopy. The second component is the waterfall itself with a series of sculptures positioned at the top of the fall. The final aspect is a tall concrete 'tree' structure that physically links the two *mountains* together and reappears as part of the rear structure [figure 27-28].

At the rear its cylindrical branches swell and appear to be ripening, or cocoon-like they nurture something incubating within. The mass of these objects is also apparent. Although the concrete structure elegantly clings to the surrounding walls, the soft and material cast of the walls and scale of the works leaves it feeling heavy, barely clinging to the surface. Adding further concern over its stability is the presence of the steel reinforcement bars protruding from the volumes. Contrary to our preconceptions, the visual, projecting presence of these bars neither elaborate on the nature of its underlying reinforcing structure nor does it provide us with real clues regarding its nature of growth and spread. Facile tectonics, or rather the aesthetics that emerge from its almost superficial mention, as if added on as an afterthought by quick pencil strokes, merely adds to the façade's chaos and confusion, rendering any reading of its history and precedent impossible. In a similar vein to the waterfall described above, we again see the flamboyant and 'life-giving' presence of the waterfall alongside the *vulgar*, almost fungal and insect-like spread that covers the surface. There is a certain amount of chance or *experimentation* in this approach, where a final form is neither preconceived nor even desired. Also, as Harbison explains, 'unlike the work of real architects, these buildings get better with everything which goes wrong, and every inappropriate alteration. They are places where cost constraints cause entertaining botches, where devices cobbled together in a hurry are more expressive than better ways of doing the job' (Harbison 2001, 121).

In addition to the working methods the presence of nature effortlessly ravishing through what man has tried so hard to erect demonstrates the transience of human endeavour. Yet, through these creations is revealed a desire for the forgotten and abandoned. There is, of course, a great deal of pleasure to be had from the morose and tragic. Through the destruction we are able to fill in the gaps, to picture the incomplete scenography in its entirety, on our own terms and through our inner visions. However, it is not only the work of self taught architects that engage in the 'cobbled together' approach, Le Corbusier abdicated the considerable responsibility of the construction details to the site-workers and Jeannerret, revelling in the chance-results and potential for 'happy accidents'.

For Le Corbusier there was a clear separation between the architectural solution (developed in the sketchbooks) and the final built form. These 'faults' were celebrated by Le Corbusier as he noted in the construction of the Unité, 'the defects shout at one from all parts of the structure . . . exposed concrete shows the least incidents of the shattering, the joints of the planks, the fibres and knots of the wood . . . in men and women do you not see the wrinkles and the birth marks?.. Faults are human; they are ourselves, our daily lives. What matters is to go further, to live, to be intense, to aim high, and to be loyal!' (as quoted in Jencks 1973, 142). Le Corbusier did not try to hide the 'faults' or unpredictability of the reinforced concrete, and embraced it in the same terms as human character or temperament. Jencks, specifically writing about Chandigarh's construction and Le Corbusier's absence during that time comments on the design methods, ' a method which allowed a *certain amount* of interpretation and execution by others' (Jencks 1973, 157). This 'certain amount', was significant. It was this approach to the construction, an almost laissez-faire cavalier attitude, relishing chance and innovation that perhaps gave Nek Chand the confidence or even the permission to realise that he could also experiment in this way. Indirectly Le Corbusier was sanctioning the Indian workers to

make decisions, to translate his drawings loosely in terms of the construction method and then assessing the results post-construction.

It was a risky solution and could be interpreted as a negligent attitude towards architectural practice; however, Le Corbusier viewed his work in conceptually where the *idea* is all that really counts. Le Corbusier's approach is also crucially recognising that there will always be a separation and fault-line between what is drawn and imagined by the designer/architect and what is physically constructed - the precision of the engineered machine-age was superseded by the imperfect and accidental. Later on in the Rock Garden's development Nek Chand also delegated and entrusted considerable portions of the building, sculpting and maintenance of the garden to others. However, the workers in the Rock Garden were selected and trained directly by Nek Chand and were under his daily supervision rather than anonymous contractors working to a fixed-price contract. It is also important to stress that different methods produce different results and Nek Chand's 'hands on' approach working directly with the material on a site he was extremely familiar with ensured a process of testing and trialling. This is completely different to the outcomes randomly and perhaps to an extent naively generated through Le Corbusier's method of working with scale drawings issued from Paris.

### Overlap

Stemming from the found collection we see a shift in Le Corbusier's work towards the brutal and the primitive. In Nek Chand's work there is also a certain 'mimicking' of particular Chandigarh features and a more geometrical, ordered approach. In Sector-17 (the major shopping sector of the city) we see classic examples of the components of the 'Chandigarh style'. This includes circular columns, a recessed ground floor with overhanging balconies. The balustrade between the columns is typically a solid rectangular block - one that is not generally found on buildings outside of Chandigarh [figure 29]. In the Rock Garden we see a similar example, adopted by Nek Chand on one of his fortress buildings [figure 30]; there is also a shift towards the ordered and geometrical in Phase-3, with concrete reliefs [figure 31] arranged in a similar pattern to the near-by High Court building [figure 32].



Figure 29



Figure 30

These latest features indicate a development from Bhatti's early interpretations of the Rock Garden being a rural response to Chandigarh (Bhatti 1982). Chandigarh can be viewed

as Le Corbusier's interpretation of a *museumised* India, within which Nek Chand has operated between the lines, inventing and concocting his own view of an historical India, which has taken the form of paradisiacal waterfalls, sacred caves and palatial-fortresses in Phase-3. Alongside this, we also see the fragmented, the ruptured and the ruined with complex composite ensembles of multiple forms, comparable to the Assembly building of Sector-1. Nek Chand's adoption of these classic Chandigarh details illustrates more than a borrowing of a particular architectural vocabulary. It demonstrates a desire to be viewed as equal to the 'mentor' - copying as a means of stating parity - whilst at the same time deviating from the style to incorporate historical typologies.

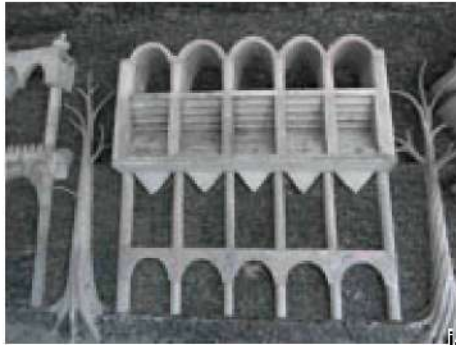


Figure 31



Figure 32

## Notes

- 1 For a discussion on the collaboration between Le Corbusier (then Jeanneret) and Ozenfant during the 'Purist period' (immediately post-WWI), see Jencks, C. (1973). pp. 52-57.
- 2 For a discussion on how Le Corbusier saw the world as divided between opposites and how the generation of the Modulor was essentially a compromise to cover over the incongruity between its appearance and the mathematical actuality, see Evans, R. (2000), pp. 272-320.
- 3 The Edict of Chandigarh is on display in the leisure valley on a plaque and its object is '... to enlighten the present and future citizens of Chandigarh about the basic concepts of planning of the city so that they become its guardians and save it from the whims of individuals'. It was a simplified edition of Le Corbusier's document entitled, 'For the Establishment Statute of the Land', which contained three sections and was presented to the High Level Committee.
- 4 These dates were established through the commemoration plaques in the garden and the surveying work of SS Bhatti, who documented the garden prior to 1980. Bhatti, S. S. (1982). Rock Garden in Chandigarh: a critical evaluation of the work of Nek Chand. Queensland, The University of Queensland.

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