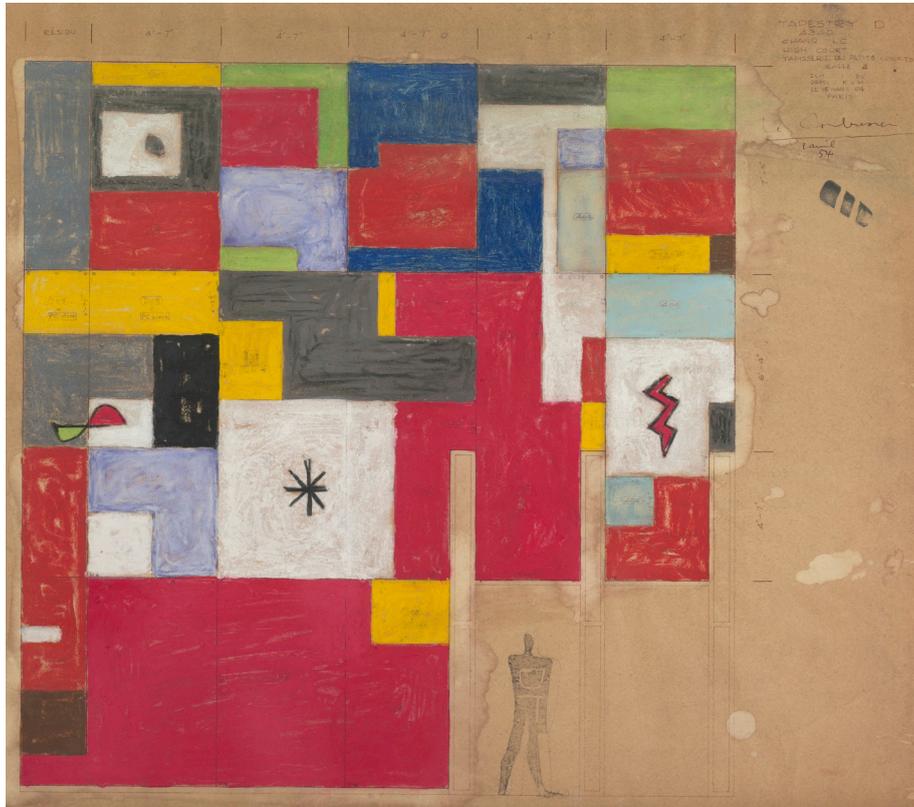
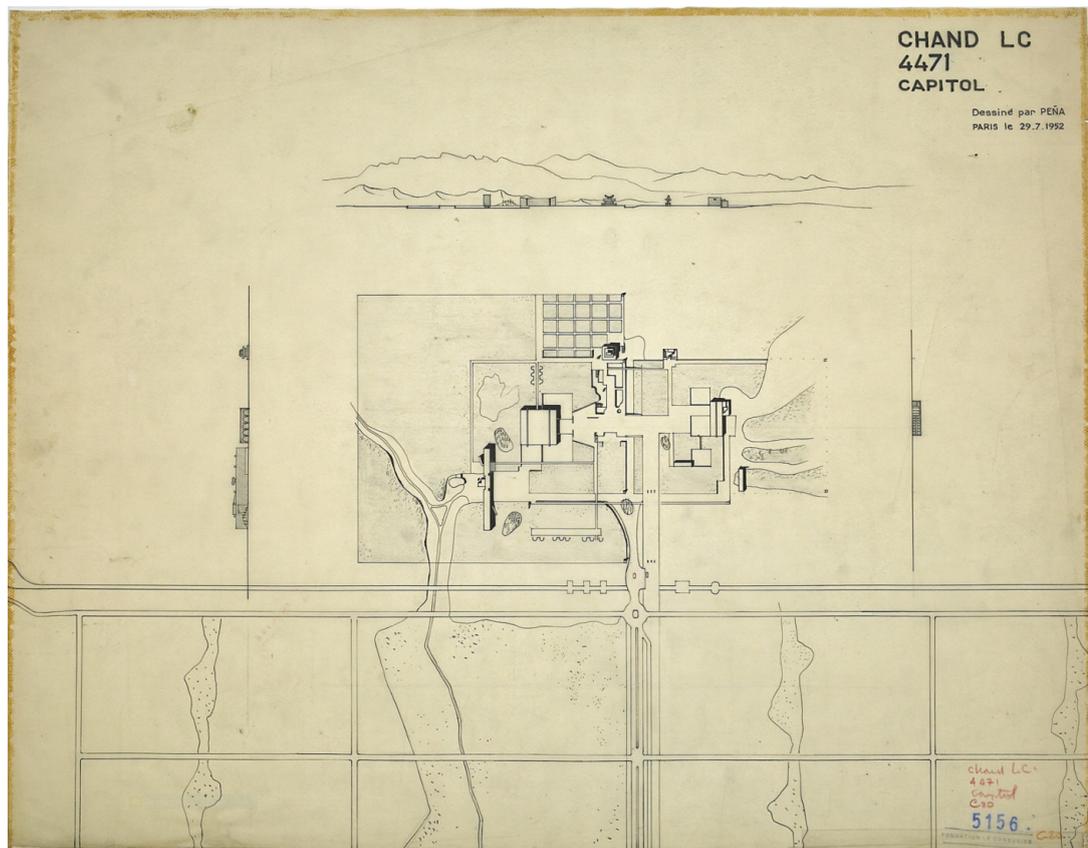


# LC. #03 RECHERCHES



Le Corbusier.  
Dessin de Tapisserie des  
Petits Courts. Salle 4. Haute  
Court, Chandigarh. Avril  
1954. FLC 3408.

**The Void in Chandigarh's Capitol Complex: A Legacy at an Eastern Scale / I. Quintana y M. C. O'Byrne -- Ático Beistegui: bifurcaciones superpuestas. El significado del montaje como técnica proyectual en Le Corbusier / P. V. Álvarez -- Anthropophagic Affairs: Le Corbusier, Paulo Prado and New World Revolutions / D. Ortiz dos Santos -- Los valores del ornamento entre Ruskin y Le Corbusier: transformaciones bajo la luz de un "nuevo espíritu" / J. Fernández Posadas -- Simone Galpin, femme effacée de la rue de Sèvres / S. Feraux-Rubin**



Plan du Capitol . "Chand LC  
4471 Capitol. 29.7.1952".  
FLC 5156.

# THE VOID IN CHANDIGARH'S CAPITOL COMPLEX: A LEGACY AT AN EASTERN SCALE

*Ingrid Quintana Guerrero and María Cecilia O'Byrne Orozco*

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**Abstract:** The admittance of 17 of Le Corbusier's architectural works on the UNESCO's heritage list, in July 2016, raised controversies that echo the criticisms made by the architectural historian Manfredo Tafuri (Rome, 1935 – Venice, 1984) regarding The Capitol Complex in Chandigarh (India), which was the only urban project included in the UNESCO's dossier. Tafuri's criticism focused on the vastness of the scale addressed, on the visual primacy of the project and on the supposed absence of a concept of unity. This paper rebuts the sheer understanding of the Capitol Complex strictly from its architecture and from a Western urban imaginary. The prejudices regarding modern urbanism, the unfinished condition of the work and its current state prevent many of its detractors from acknowledging the ongoing dialogue between the cultural background of Chandigarh, the inhabitant's reception of the Capitol of the city, and Le Corbusier's departure from the first phase of his own urban theory.

**Keywords:** Le Corbusier, modern urban space, Indian urbanism, criticism of modernity, Chandigarh.

**Résumé :** L'inscription de 17 réalisations de Le Corbusier dans la liste du patrimoine mondiale par l'Unesco, en Juillet 2016, a éveillé des polémiques qui reproduisent les critiques de l'historien de l'architecture Manfredo Tafuri (Rome, 1935 - Venise, 1984) à propos du seul projet urbain inclus dans le dossier Unesco : l'ensemble du Capitole à Chandigarh (Inde). Les critiques tafuriennes se concentrent sur la grandeur de son échelle, la primauté visuelle du projet et l'absence prétendue d'un concept intégrateur. Cet article réfute la compréhension du projet du Capitole du simple point de vue architectural, ou d'une vision urbaine occidentale.. Le préjugé sur l'urbanisme, la condition inachevée de la réalisation et son état actuel empêchent que certains détracteurs de reconnaître chez elle le dialogue entre le contexte culturel de Chandigarh, la réception du Capitole parmi les habitants de la ville et l'écartement que l'architecte lui-même à fait de ses premières théories urbaines.

**Mots-clé :** Le Corbusier, espace urbain moderne, urbanisme indien, critique de la modernité, Chandigarh.

**Resumen:** La inclusión de 17 obras arquitectónicas realizadas por Le Corbusier en la lista patrimonial de la UNESCO, en Julio de 2016, levantó controversias que hacen eco de las críticas lanzadas por el historiador de la arquitectura Manfredo Tafuri (Roma, 1935 - Venecia, 1984) acerca del conjunto del Capitolio en Chandigarh (India) - único proyecto urbano incluido en el dossier de la UNESCO. La crítica se enfocó en la vastedad de la escala abordada, en la primacía visual del proyecto y en la supuesta ausencia en este de un concepto unitario. Este artículo refuta el mero entendimiento del conjunto del Capitolio desde su arquitectura y desde un imaginario urbano occidental. Los prejuicios acerca del urbanismo moderno, la condición inacabada de la obra y su estado actual impiden que muchos de sus detractores reconozcan el diálogo que en ella se da entre el trasfondo cultural de Chandigarh, la recepción del Capitolio por parte de los habitantes de la ciudad, y la distancia que allí el propio Le Corbusier tomó en relación con la primera fase de su teoría urbana.

**Palabras clave:** Le Corbusier, espacio urbano moderno, urbanismo indio, crítica de la modernidad, Chandigarh.

## Introduction

The admittance of 17 of Le Corbusier's projects on the UNESCO's heritage list was controversial. According to UNESCO, these projects "reflect the solutions that the Modern Movement sought to address the challenges of the twentieth century regarding the invention of new architectural techniques to respond to the needs of the society"<sup>1</sup>. In the Spanish newspaper *El País*, architectural critic Anaxtu Zalabeascoa<sup>2</sup> celebrated the admittance as the granting of the modern architecture scepter "to an architect from whom so many designers have learned, right and wrong". Conversely, *The New York Times* reproduced the statements of Le Corbusier's contemporary detractors, such as Marc Perelman, Xavier de Jarcy and François Chaslin<sup>3</sup>. Their general disapproval was centered on the Corbusian dwelling typification and the possible links of the architect with French fascist groups. Furthermore, these critics took issue with the master plan for the new city, Chandigarh, the capital of the state of Punjab, by Le Corbusier, Jane Drew and Maxwell Fry. In particular, they referred to the alleged totalitarianism in Corbusian models and urban theories of the 1920s and 1930s: e.g. *Plan Voisin*, *Ville Contemporaine pour trois millions d'habitants* and *Ville Radieuse*. None of the critics deeply examined the *Ensemble du Capitol* (Capitol Complex), Chandigarh's administrative center.

Much of the current rejection of Chandigarh's master plan is based on two fundamental pillars<sup>4</sup>. The first pillar is based on the chronicles of those who have expressed their invalidating views primarily regarding the Capitol Complex, which is surrounded by barbed wire and trenches due to the conflict in Kashmir. This conflict dates back to 1947, when the independence of the Indian state of Punjab from the British Empire and the birth of Pakistan prompted the need for a new capital city. The second pillar echoes certain views from the urban planning discipline that emerged during the second half of the 20th century, including those of sociologist Pierre Francastel and philosopher Françoise Choay, both of whom opposed the construction of the new city. This and other of Le Corbusier's urban proposals underwent animosities from Choay and Francastel stated in terms of: "[...] homogeneous planetary space where topographical determinations are denied. Independence with respect to the place is not only, as in the 19th century, the result of the certainty of having the truth in any valid way, but also of the new technical possibilities: *bulldozer architecture* was born that could level mountains and fill valleys"<sup>5</sup>.

During the early years of his career, Le Corbusier dreamed of the possibilities offered by the industrial world and the possibilities of its machines regarding economic and esthetic alternatives. In his book *Urbanisme* (1924) he referred to "the town as the grip of man on nature [...] Why would it not be, even today, a source of poetry?"<sup>13</sup>. Le Corbusier could never imagine that his biggest urban project would be almost *handmade*; that it would be women who would carry small buckets with concrete on their heads to build the Capitol Complex, instead of large cranes moving the material around (Fig. 1). The result of this process was *poetry*, as he mentioned to his mother: "[...], I send you this little letter without any modesty, but full of pride, so that you know that – finally – the architect, the urban planner, the painter and the sculptor have given birth here to poetry"<sup>12</sup>.

The Italian architectural historian Manfredo Tafuri, one of Le Corbusier's major critics, studied the *Ensemble du Capitole* in Chandigarh in his article "Machine et mémoire: La città nell'opera di Le Corbusier"<sup>11</sup>. There, the development of the administrative Complex is perceived as a turning point in the Le Corbusier's urban trajectory. In this regard, Tafuri stated: "But it is precisely the rupture of all fictional unity that Le Corbusier experiments with in the 1940s: while Le Corbusier is renouncing the immanence of his totalizing hypotheses, the multiversum, the overwhelming plurality of forces that penetrate the subject as well as intersubjective relations falls upon his formal world"<sup>10</sup>. Tafuri's appreciation is right; however, inconsistencies appear in the development of *Tafurian* criticism, partly raised by an erroneous starting hypothesis: "Le Corbusier seems to treat the planning of the city as a purely professional matter: it should be enough, he thinks, to apply the previously elaborated theoretical corpus, appropriately revised and adapted to the Indian situation; he refuses, having completed the plans for the capitol, he refuses to enter into a discourse that cannot be expressed with these means. [...] It is no longer the figures of unity, process, and the projectile [*Unité* prototype] launched against the future but rather those of isolation, finiteness, and interruption that form the basis of the capitol of Chandigarh."<sup>9</sup>.

1. UNESCO, "The Architectural Work of Le Corbusier, an Outstanding Contribution to the Modern Movement", (website). Report posted in 2016 (accessed on 11 April 2017) <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1321>.

2. Anaxtu Zabalbeascoa, "La UNESCO consagra a Le Corbusier". *El País*, article published on July 19<sup>th</sup>, 2016 (accessed on 3 July 2020)

3. Rachel Donadio, "Le Corbusier revisited", *The New York Times*, the 19<sup>th</sup> of July 2016.

4. Alternative contemporary criticism, different from the one expressed by Indian authors, can be found in Dogan Hosol; Peter Davey and Jean Michel Place, "The Critical Review". In: Celebrating Chandigarh, edited by Jaspreet Takhar (Chandigarh: Chandigarh Perspectives, in association with Mapin Publishing, 2002).

5. Françoise Choay, *Le Corbusier* (Barcelona: Bruquera, 1961), 44 (translation by the authors).

6. Le Corbusier, *Urbanisme* (Paris: Crès, 1924), 10 (translation by the authors).

7. Le Corbusier, letter written to his mother from Chandigarh, 1951, FLC (unknown reference).

8. Originally published in Italian in: *Casabella* No. 503, Year XLVIII (June / July 1985): 45.

9. Manfredo Tafuri, translated by Stephen Sartarelli, "Machine et Mémoire: The city in the work of Le Corbusier", in: *The Le Corbusier Archive*, vol. 10, edited by H. Allen Brooks (New York: Garland, 1984), 211-212.

10. Tafuri, "Machine et Mémoire...", 212.



**FIG. 1**  
Group of women carrying small buckets with concrete for the construction of the Secretariat, c.a. 1953. Source: Foundation Ernst Scheidegger, Zürich.

To suppose that Le Corbusier used the Capitol Complex as an ideal setting to glorify his architecture while subjecting the rest of the city to the rigors of his theories is only tenable if we ignore the interrelation between the administrative sector and other sectors of Chandigarh; for example, the esplanade belongs to a continuous landscape system. Like several of his predecessors, Tafuri assumed that Le Corbusier was acting from an Eurocentric perspective (a clear rupture with the past) to formulate what must certainly be his most important urban project.

### **Controversial heritage: Capitol Complex's through the lens of Western urban tradition**

One of the first evidences why it is inferred here that Tafuri tried to fit Chandigarh into a Western logic is that he considered it a response to "the selfishness of the 19th century"<sup>8</sup>. The author does not provide more clues about such selfishness. In contrast, he refers clearly to the Athenian collective space, which Le Corbusier knew first-hand thanks to his youth travels. The historian compared the Acropolis with the Capitol Complex: "[...] where a modern 'builder of symbols' seeks to converse with time, nature, and being. The separation wrought by Le Corbusier in the body of Chandigarh is perfectly classical. [...but] Nothing in fact joins together the gigantic volumes of the Secretariat, the Parliament, and the High Court of Justice: nothing—neither roads, perspectival allusions, nor formal triangulations helps the eye to situate itself with respect to these three 'characters'<sup>7</sup>".

The urban interstices of the architecture in the Capitol Complex would, according to Tafuri, adopt a form of waste, trace and unfinished margin<sup>6</sup>. The Greek notion of *foreshortening* – represented in Corbusian architectures through the concept of *promenade architecturale* – has greater meaning as a whole than the optical apprehension of isolated objects assumed by the Italian. It can be said that foreshortening even has a greater meaning than the visual relationship with the surrounding landscape, when comparing the interpretation of Mount Lycabettus and Piraeus, from the Acropolis, with the establishment of the Himalayas, as a backdrop

11. The historian reduced the whole to its objects, understood as words, as names to which his creator purported to endow with sacredness: "The allegories with which the work is sprinkled allude to a course of initiation at the culmination of which the language of archetypes is supposed to link up with a hypothetical catharsis. But no 'thread of Ariadne' is provided for such a course as this". Tafuri, "Machine et Memoire...", 212.

12. Tafuri, "Machine et Memoire...", 212-213.

13. "The three great 'desiring objects' seek to shatter their own solitude: The Secretariat through its inclined ramp and the broken masses of its façade gradations; the Parliament through the distortion of the geometric solids that dominate it like hermetic totems; The High Court of Justice through the bending of the brise-soleil and the giant entrance stairway." Tafuri, "Machine et Memoire...", 213.

for the composition of the Capitol Complex. But the rugged topography that characterizes the experience of the Greek pilgrim, which features pauses and close perspectives, breaks with the idea of a straight axis – constantly present in Baroque urbanism. Tafuri was probably missing such as straight axis in Chandigarh. Le Corbusier, who decided to alter the plain on which the Capitol was placed, used a solution analogous to the Greek pilgrim. His strategy was not to wipe out the geographical memory of the place, which is in fact one of its biggest features of the project, as the Erosion Valley would serve to articulate the main green axis of the city (*the Leisure Valley*) with the Capitol Complex. Instead, the project's intention was to generate pits, water mirrors and ramps in a non-consecutive disposition, in utter contradiction with the principles of monumental urbanism of the 17th century. In the book *Towards a New Architecture*, Le Corbusier had already distanced himself from the great French groups, as he identified in Versailles the same lack of unity that motivated Tafuri's accusations against Corbusian works: "Immense vanity! At the foot of the throne, his architects brought to him plans drawn from a bird's-eye view which seem like a chart of stars [...]. But a man has only two eyes at a level of about 5 feet 6 inches above the ground, and can only look at one point at a time. The arms of the stars are only visible one after the other, and what you have is really a right angle masked by foliation [...]: the great basin, the embroidered flower-beds which are outside the general panorama, the buildings that one can only see in fragments as one moves about. It is a snare and a delusion."<sup>5</sup>

From Le Corbusier's statement it can be concluded that his interest is fixed in the construction of the void as a concrete and tangible reality, unlike the urban ensemble conceived by André Le Nôtre in Versailles in which the predictable sequence of episodes and perspectives towards infinity prevailed. Le Corbusier's interest on the void is revealed in his visits to *Piazza dei Duomo* in Pisa, in 1907 and 1911. During his last trip, Charles-Édouard Jeanneret (his given name) said: "The whole is a unit. Note that I say this after having seen Athens [...] I am crazy about the color white. About the cube [the duomo], about the sphere [the *battisterio*], about the cylinder [the *campanile*], about the pyramid, total unity and a large empty space"<sup>15</sup>. Certainly, the scale of the Pisan square is not comparable with that of the Louis XIV's domains in France or with the Chandigarh's Capitol Complex, but it does identify a significant antecedent: *the void*, delimited by turf and pavement, as agglutinating elements of the repertoire of volumes that inhabit the site. Tafuri perceived a similar intention within the Indian project, although without understanding the need for a greater distance between buildings in the Capitol: "It is difference, and not dialectics, that holds the three volumes together: they speak through their distortions, revealing that the space separating them functions to prime the multiple electric arcs. Those three objects, indeed, can be said to be 'desirous' in a real sense. Above all, they desire to overcome the condition that chains them to this form and this place; they desire to come into contact with each other and, further, to interlink with each other in a single tangle of forms"<sup>16</sup>.

When speaking of *tensions*, Tafuri showed a fear of the "new frontiers for the utterable"<sup>17</sup> that shape the unbuilt space; a *horror vacui* which is understandable for those who have grown up in Italy. He probably wished for the buildings to *kiss*, like in the street profiles in any historic Italian city, or to be violently separated by a monumental axis, creating *scars* similar to the urban projects in Rome promoted by the popes during the Renaissance, fracturing the urban fabric. But none of these strategies is valid for a context as dissimilar as that of the Punjab, conditioned not only by the drama of an endless civil war, but also by the superposition of Eastern millennial cosmogonies and by the rigors of the Indian sun and the monsoon. Contrary to Choay's presumption, Le Corbusier was no stranger to these factors, as they gave him the measure of the human scale within the Capitol Complex.

14. Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture* (New York: Dover, 1986), 14. Original version: Le Corbusier, *Vers Une Architecture* (Paris: Crès, 1923).

15. Le Corbusier, letter to William Ritter, October 1911, FLC R3 (18) 128.

16. Tafuri, "Machine et Memoire...", 49.

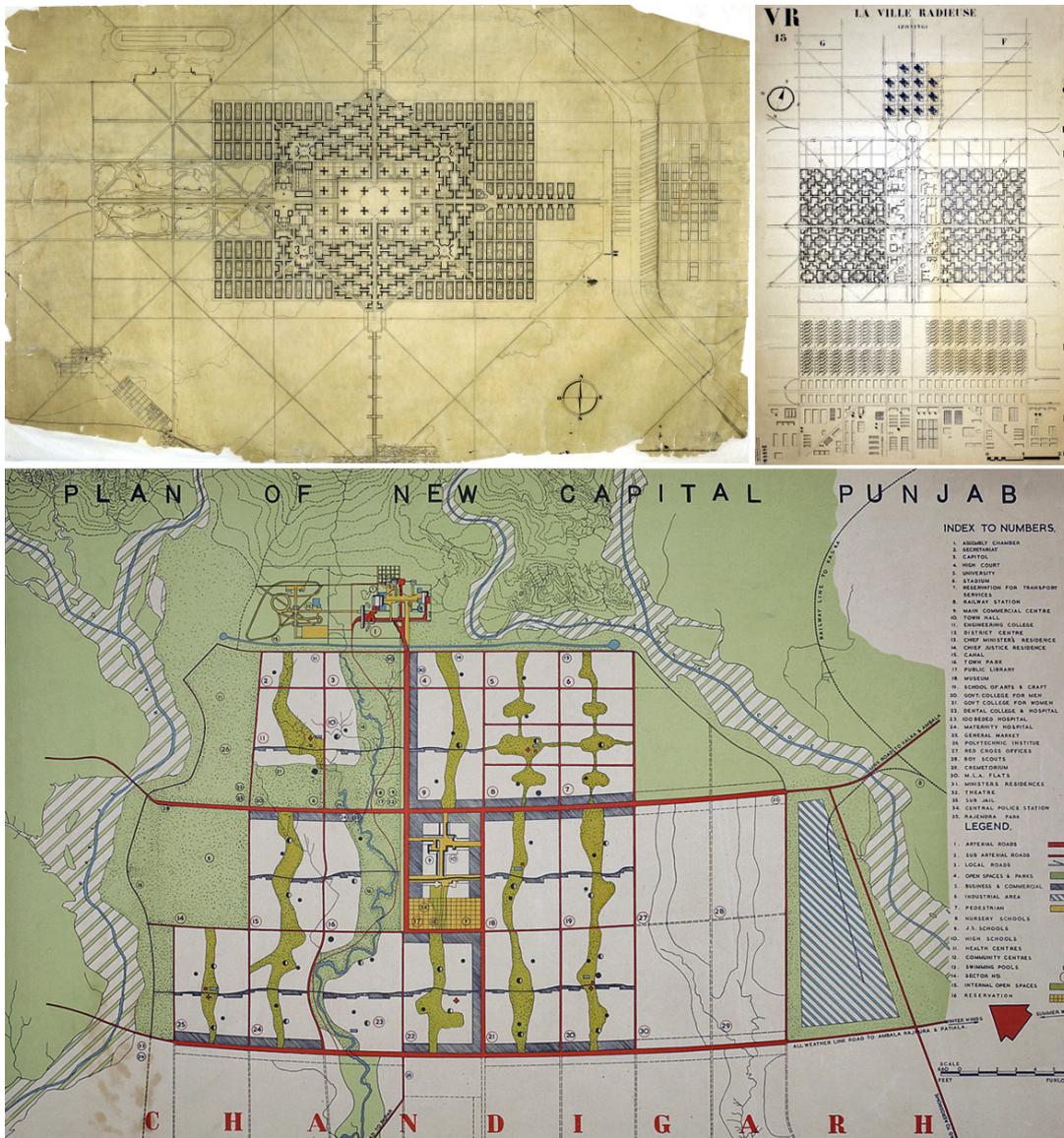
17. Tafuri, "Machine et Memoire...", 214.

## The administrative Complex: a problem at an oriental scale

One of Tafuri's main criticisms regarding the urban structure of Chandigarh is the separation of the Capitol Complex from the rest of the city. In Western urbanism, it is usual to find segregation between the places designated for public or religious power and the grid where common citizens are located (the city of Versailles itself is an example of this). The all-too common tendency of comparing the *Ville Radieuse* (also conceived by Le Corbusier, in 1930) with the scheme he materialized in Chandigarh, as an attempt to discern the latter's conceptual source, is nonetheless risky. The 1930's theoretical model, including public buildings, housing and industry, would be organized around a monumental axis ending at the Business City, which turned into a set of Cartesian skyscrapers in a reminiscence of a previous theoretical model by Le Corbusier himself: the *Ville Contemporaine pour Trois Millions d'Habitants* (1922). In this plan, the Business City would be clearly separated from the core of the town, featuring skyscrapers in the center of the composition (Fig. 2).

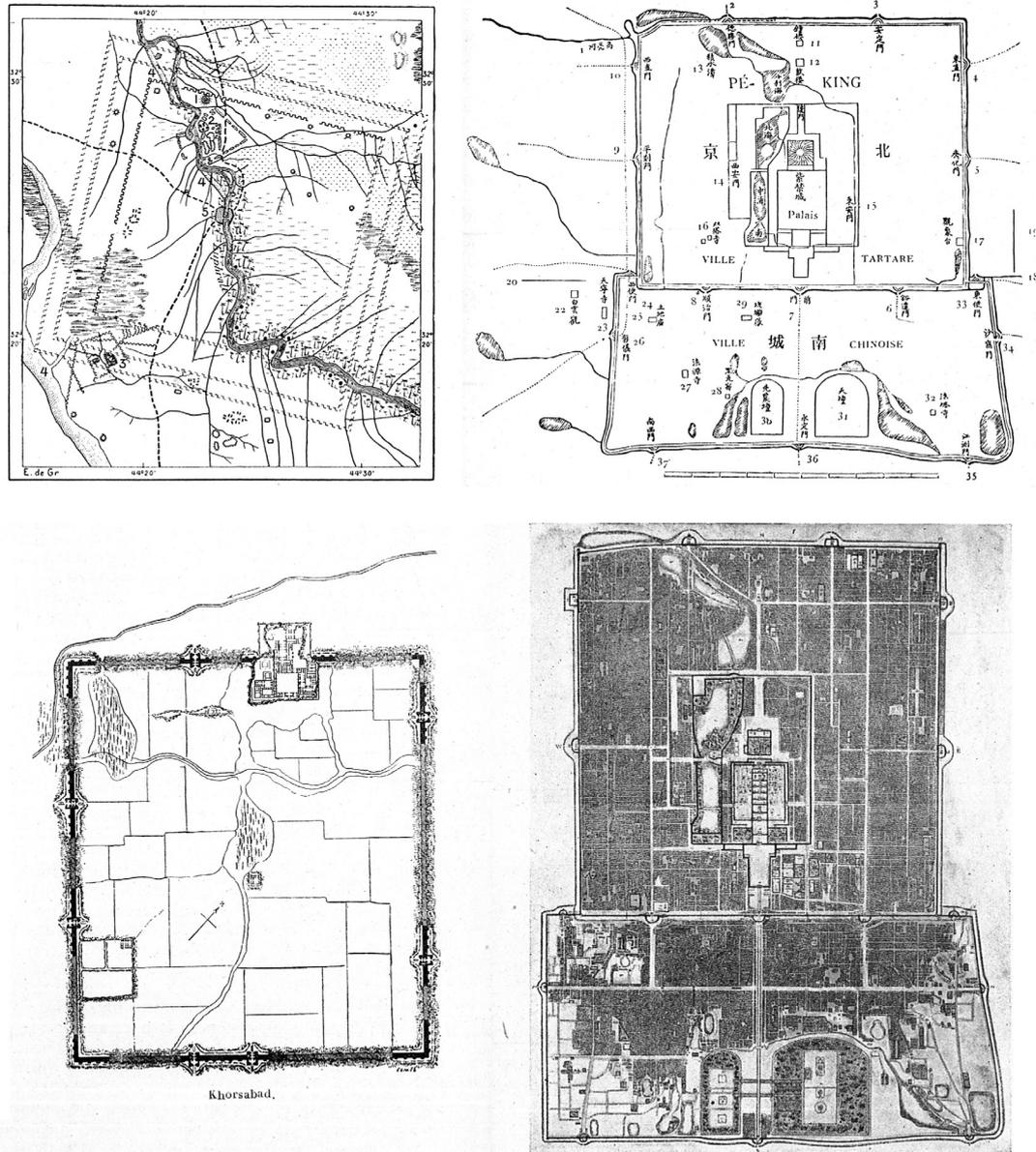
Still, the origin of the Capitol Complex arises further back: Le Corbusier became interested in urban history in 1915, when he studied cities at the *Bibliothèque Nationale de France*. He subsequently published much of the information reviewed at the Parisian library in his magazine *L'Esprit Nouveau* (first published in 1920) and his book *Urbanisme*. The publications include two examples of emblematic oriental metropolises, where the power-representing buildings are separated from the rest of the urban fabric : Khorsabad (old Dur-Sharrukin) in Mesopotamia and Beijing, the Chinese capital (Fig. 3). In these texts, Le Corbusier did not refer directly to the images of these cities, though they undoubtedly form a unitary discourse. In *Urbanism*, the two cities were illustrated in the chapter "L'Ordre", where the right angle is identified as one of the urban organizing principles throughout history. Khorsabad and Beijing were mentioned for the second time in the chapter *La Grande Ville*, where the image of the Chinese capital has the following caption: "Compare this plan with that of Paris, four pages later. It is us, Westerners, who have experienced the need to invade China to colonize it!"<sup>18</sup>

18. Le Corbusier, *Urbanisme*, 81 (translation by the authors).



**FIG. 2**  
Plans of three cities designed by Le Corbusier: *Ville de Trois Millions d'Habitants*, 1922; *Ville Radieuse*, 1930; and *Chandigarh*, 1953. Sources: FLC 31006A; FLC 24909D; FLC 05553.

Le Corbusier was astonished by similar searches among the examples in the book, elected from Western urban culture. The Asian examples were, in essence, enclosures that clearly segregate *power* from the world of the common people. Each example is organized by two axes placed at right angles, aligning the urban structure with the cardinal points. André Leroi-Gourhan describes the system of symbolic representation of the universe in the establishing of capital cities, as something common to American, Chinese, Indian and Mesopotamian cultures. This system characterizes the search of an order for the spatial integration of individuals, in which the movement and the cross represent the four cardinal points (Fig. 4): "The ideal continuity is ensured by the movement of the sky which provides the cross of the cardinal points or any other astral reference considered fixed. The city is then in the center of the world and it is fixed in a way that guarantees



**FIG. 3**  
Khorsabad and Beijing  
plans. Le Corbusier,  
*Urbanisme*, 1924.

that the sky is pivoting around it. The central point of the sky and the earth are integrated into a universal device whose image it reflects: the sun rises to its east and sets to its west, at equal distances, and its inhabitants are inclined to think that beyond their halo there are less favored centers, near the west, and the shadow country near the point of origin of the rising sun. Its West and East are the East and the West par excellence since they mark the entrance and the exit of the star in a microcosm totally humanized and symbolic."<sup>19</sup>

This cross seems to be the same used in the Roman cities to set their *Cardus* and *Decumanus*, and also the one that Le Corbusier saw when visiting India. In the Hindu tradition, the cross is a fundamental part of the structure known as the *Vastu*, which is a mandala or representation of the macrocosm. This mandala is a microcosm that guides humankind in the construction of the world on earth, in God's image and likeness. From a secular point of view, Sashikala Ananth explains: "The Vaastu tradition [...] has developed its entire system of building technology upon the fundamental premise that the earth or soil is a living organism out of which other living creatures and organic forms emerge. [...] This premise is extended further, and all objects containing this life energy that occupy the earth are likewise called Vastu. Thus plants, trees, buildings and sculptures are all considered to be alive and part of the whole living sub-system. Each substance or Vastu is also placed on a plane or support. This plane is called Vaastu. The earth is both Vastu and Vaastu since it is a substance as well as a support. Vaastu is further explained as the living space (vas means "to be" or "to live") or dwelling space. Vaastu is the individual site or land identified for a village or a neighborhood. Vaastu is also the building enclosure."<sup>20</sup>

Likewise, Charles Correa illustrates *Vastu* with the image of a paradisiacal garden (Fig. 5):

"In Vedic times, that circle [the Purucha] is the cosmos itself – and man's central concern is to define himself and his actions in relation to it. Thus, even the buildings he constructs are models of the cosmos – no less. They are generated by magic diagrams called Vastu-Purucha Mandalas. These represent energy-fields, the center of which is simultaneously shunya (nothing) and bindu (the source or energy) – a truly mind-blowing concept, astonishingly similar to the black holes of contemporary physics."<sup>21</sup>

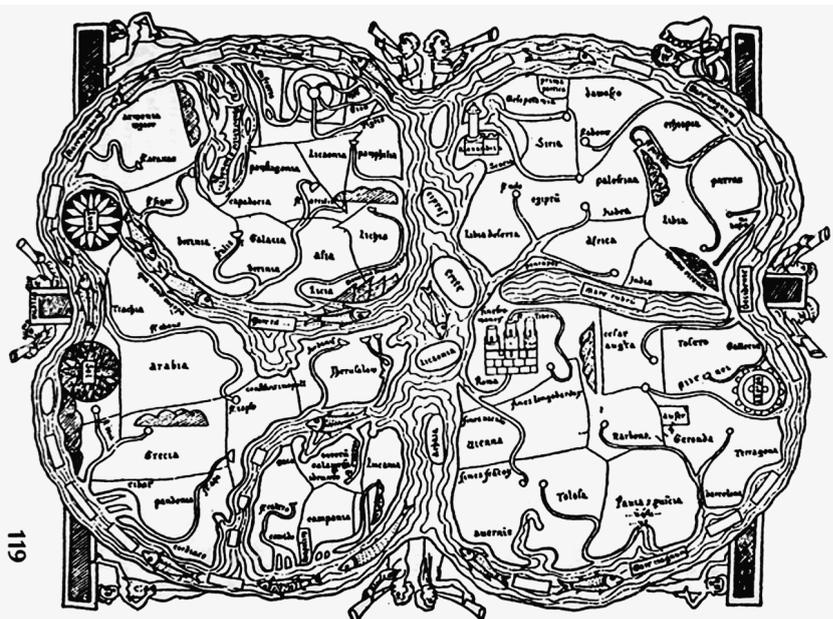
Although the *Vaastu* was crucial for the development of the urban promenade which is proposed in the Capitol<sup>22</sup>, it was not in this tradition of the *Vedas* that Le Corbusier found a living example of oriental cities

19. André Leroi-Gourhan, *Le geste et la parole. II. La mémoire et les rythmes* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1964), 159; 162-167.

20. Sashikala Ananth, *The Pocket Book of Vaastu* (Penguin: New Delhi, 2002), 23.

21. Charles Correa, "Vistara: the architecture of India", *Indian Institute of Architects Journal* 51, n.º 4 (514) (Oct. / Dec., 1986): 26-33.

22. The Indian cosmogony behind the composition of the *urban promenades* is the subject of another study by the authors (currently in peer-review process).



**FIG. 4**  
Diagram of the urban centralisation, the location of the city at the junction of the cardinal points and the codes that accompany it. Source: Leroi-Gourhan (1964).

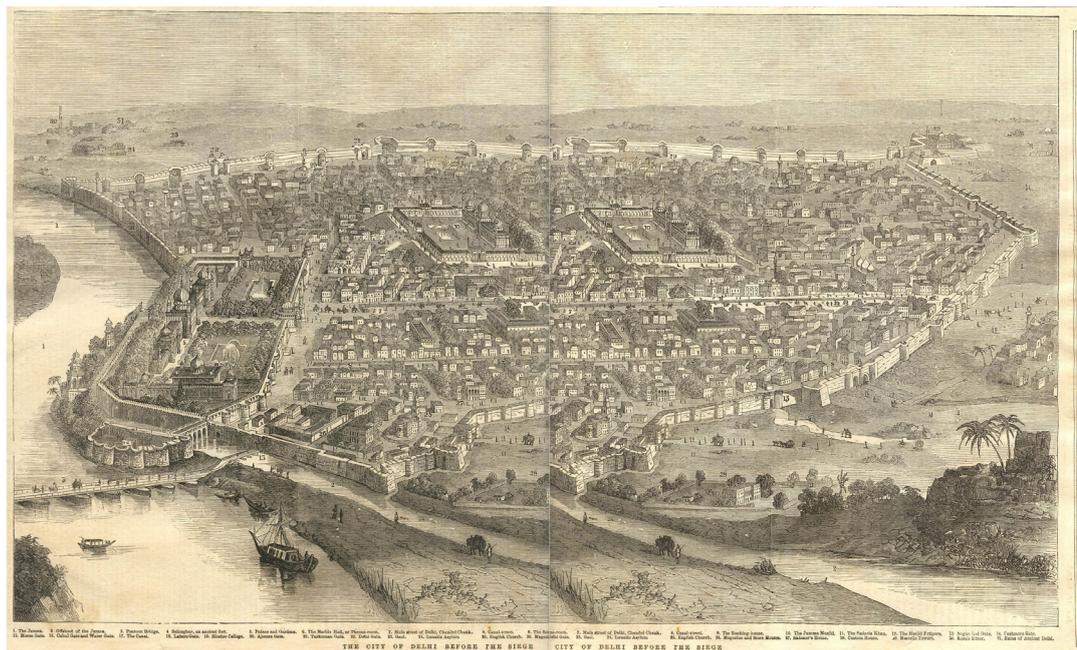
**FIG. 5**  
*Char-bagh* or *Garden of Paradise*. Source: Correa (1986).

**FIG. 6**

The City of Delhi Before the Siege. Source: *The Illustrated London News* (January 16th, 1858). Original source in public domain.

**FIG. 7**

Aerial views taken 2 km from the earth, of:  
 1. The Athens Acropolis (460-430 BC); 2. The *Piazza dei Miracoli* in Pisa (1063-1595); 3. The Palace of Versailles (1661-1692); 4. Red Fort in Delhi (1639-1648); 5. The Monumental complex of New Delhi designed by Lutyens (1911-1930); 6. The Taj Mahal (1632-1643); 7. Capitol Complex in Chandigarh; 8. The Tomb of Humayun in Delhi (1574-1625). Source: elaborated by the authors based on satellite images from Google Earth (2016).



published in *Urbanisme*. Instead, he was inspired by Old Delhi, where the Red Fort sets a unique model of how the Mughals dealt with the palace and the government building in a single unit. The Red Fort is an enclosure, a fortress attached on its western side to the pre-existing city and on the eastern side to the Junma River (Fig.6). Like many other monumental complexes constructed in India during the Mogol period, the fortress comprises a set of palaces usually placed as isolated pavilions arranged by axes, where all palaces, doors or pavilions are aligned between large esplanades. The vastness of the void, whether it consists of gardens or large pavements, constitutes its most prominent characteristic.

Authors such as Casciato have mentioned the drawings of Le Corbusier's *Mughal* gardens in India, although without referring to their conceptual dimensions<sup>23</sup>. Le Corbusier himself published several times the references that he used when thinking about and creating a city. Memories from the *Acropolis* of Athens (460-430 BC), the *Piazza dei Miracoli* in Pisa (1063-1595) and the *Palais de Versailles* (1661-1692) were included, as well as references of places that he visited in India (Fig. 7), such as the *Tomb of Humayun* in Delhi (1574-1625), the *Taj Mahal* (1632-1643), the *Red Fort* in Delhi (1639-1648) and the monumental complex of New Delhi designed by Edwin Lutyens between 1911 and 1930. By placing the aerial views of the Western monuments and the Indian counterparts referenced by Le Corbusier on the same scale, we observe their morphological resemblance in the isolation of their buildings and their separation by large gaps.

23. Maristella Casciato, "Chandigarh: Landscaping a new capital", in *Le Corbusier, an Atlas of Modern Landscapes* (Catalogue of the Exhibition), edited by Jean Louis Cohen (London: Thames & Hudson, 2013), 374.

24. New Delhi can even be twinned with the monumental axis prior to the Washington congress.

Except for the Versailles domains, the complexes in Athens and Pisa look very small compared to the Oriental examples. In the case of the Indian complexes, buildings organize large empty spaces, along with landscaped areas, paths, small squares or paved squares. A different morphology resulted from Le Nôtre's plan for Versailles and Lutyens' plan for Delhi, where the palace segregates its preceding space (the great esplanade) from its subsequent areas (the gardens). Lutyens' buildings, located on the great monumental axis topped by the Viceroy's Palace, are typologically closer to the structures in Versailles than to the constructions from the rest of the Indian complexes illustrated here<sup>24</sup>. Nonetheless, upon noticing Delhi's scale, one can state that Lutyens was seduced by their spatiality just like Le Corbusier was. So, why is Chandigarh's morphology quite different from the aforementioned references? The clue for answering this question would be found in the Eastern focus on the void that encompasses objects.



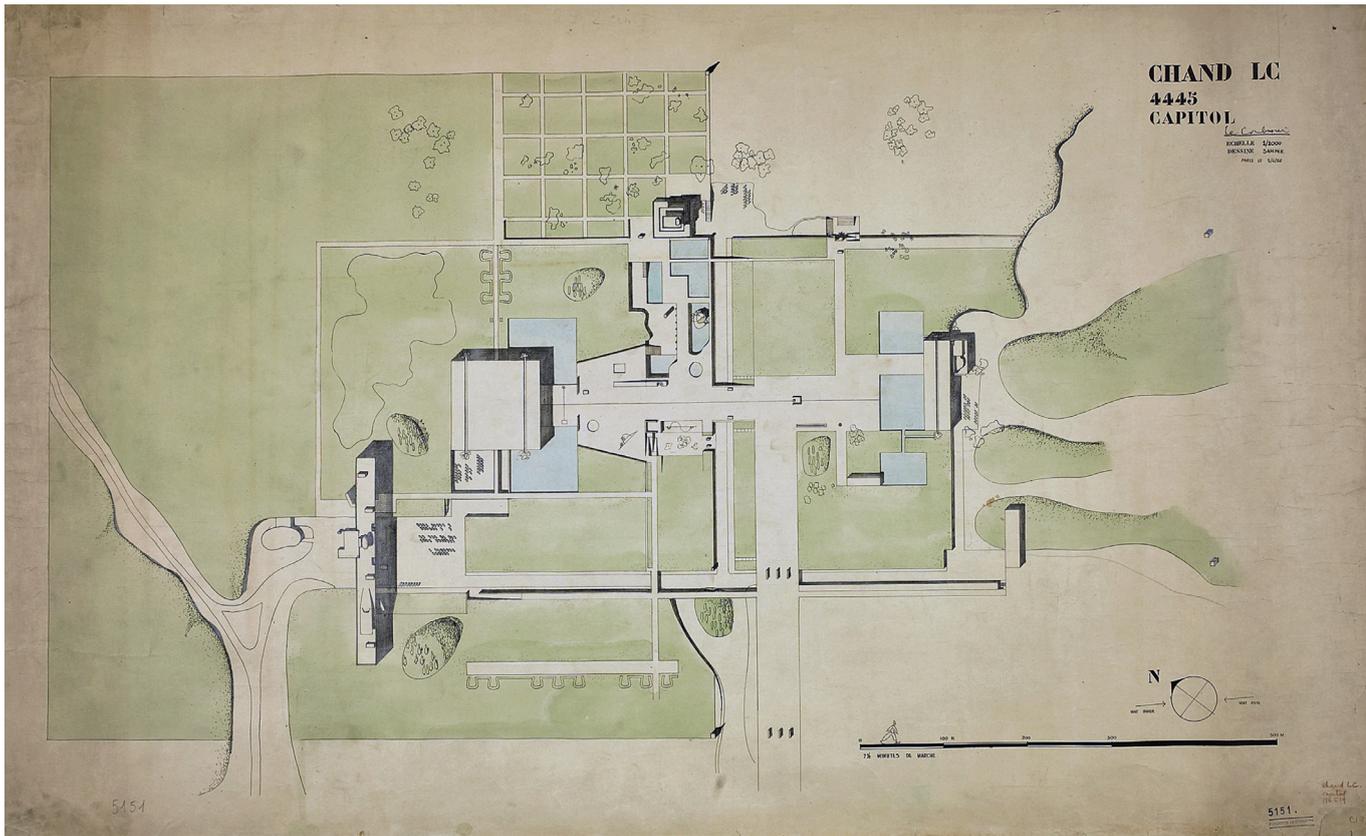
From the time of his youth, Le Corbusier showed full awareness of both void and volumes. For instance, in the chapter “The illusion of plans” in *Towards a New Architecture*, Le Corbusier criticized the way in which St. Peter’s Basilica, in Vatican City, and *Palais de Versailles* outer spaces have no relation to the interior of the architecture. This statement contrasts with his adulation of the Acropolis and Villa Adriana in Tivoli, where *the exterior is always an interior*: “... in architectural ensembles, the elements of the site itself come into play by virtue of their cubic volume, their density and the quality of the material of which they are composed, bringing sensations which are very definite and very varied [...]. The elements of the site rise up like walls panoplied in the power of their cubic co-efficient, stratification, material, etc., like the walls of a room. Walls in relation to light, light and shade, sadness, gaiety or serenity, etc. Our compositions must be formed of these elements”<sup>25</sup>.

The last description seems to oppose what happens in the conceited Versailles. For him, Versailles and Rome are not only immense vanity, but also an illusion and a deception. This is the same assessment that Tafuri made about Chandigarh’s Capitol, decades later. From a similar point of view to the Italian author, Gast argues that Le Corbusier solved the Capitol Complex by releasing its four main buildings - Assembly, Palace of Justice, Governor’s Palace and Secretariat - from each other. (Fig. 8). This made it possible for the buildings to be seen from any angle without any interference: “This distance does not lead to an urban ensemble intended to create ‘space’ with its streets, squares, and wide and narrow parts. In fact, the distance enables Le Corbusier to implement his intention of presenting each building for its own sake. ‘Self’-representation is the aim here, as Le Corbusier wants to rank each building as an independent sculpture, needing to stand freely as an individual. ‘Space’ does not have a part to play here, but ‘expanse’, the idea of presenting all this sculptural excess in a plateau”<sup>26</sup>.

This is an example of how, without a deep analysis of its composition patterns, including the fundamental pieces that would have configured the void, such as the *Governor’s Palace*, the conception of the power of the Capitol Complex as a collective space remains limited. According to Tafuri, this palace’s role was only peripheral; it is still necessary to understand the proportions of the Raj Bhavan (its Hindi name) beyond its appearance in the physical model: the volume-doubling of water mirrors would have given the building the scale intended by Le Corbusier in the first proposal.

25. Le Corbusier, *Towards...*, 154.

26. Klaus-Peter Gast, *Le Corbusier: Paris-Chandigarh* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2005), 102.



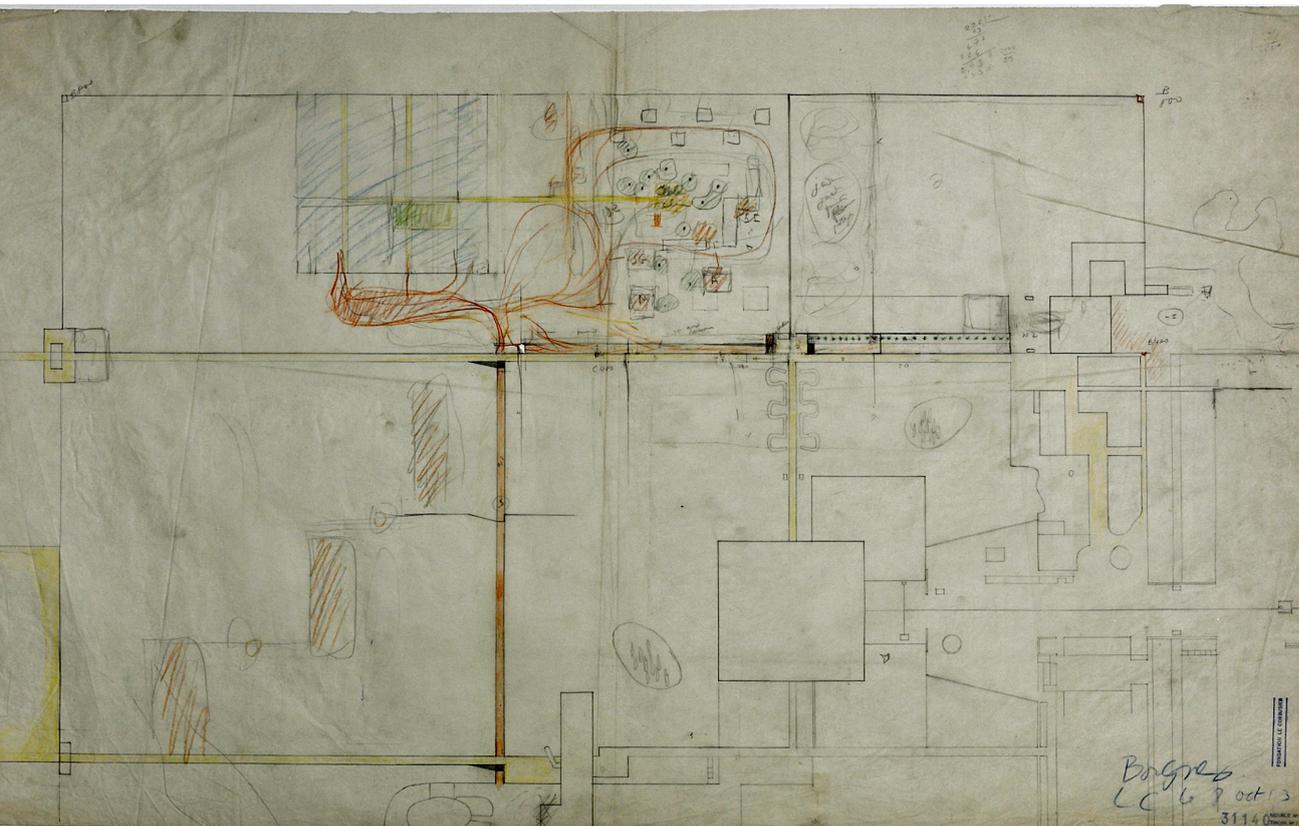
Another relevant aspect that is little considered within the historiography of Chandigarh is the design of a small village for the direct employees of the governor, requested by the Punjab authorities towards the end of 1953 (Fig. 9)<sup>27</sup>. Papillault is one of the few authors that addresses it, highlighting that Le Corbusier saw in this assignment the opportunity to put into practice the research for laborer houses that he carried out together with Pierre Jeanneret two years earlier<sup>28</sup>. Located northwest of the palace, the *Village du Gouverneur* would merge into the ground, so that it would not disturb the perspective of the hills from the esplanade. It occupied a quadrant of 800m x 800m and it stood in direct relation to the gardens of the governor located behind the Assembly and the Secretariat. In addition to its impact on the landscape, the employees' village would have offered an unusual vitality to the gardens of the governor and the Capitol Complex itself. This would have provided a mix for the daily life of its inhabitants in the esplanade for exercising, recreational activities, or socializing without social class distinctions.

Finally, as shown in the Master Plan, presented by M.N. Sharma to the local authorities and published in the eighth volume of Complete Works (also referred to as The Last Works, Fig. 10)<sup>29</sup>, the northwestern side of sector 1 (twice the size of the rest of the sectors) would have been occupied by the Rajendra Park. This park was as big as the Capitol Complex. This would have consolidated the ecological structure of the city as part of the Leisure Valley and would have been connected to the network of pedestrian paths in the Capitol Complex in the northwest-southeast direction. In turn, they would have been connected to the system of winding roads that would cross the park, separated from the residential sectors of Chandigarh by an extensive landscape. The lack of information on Rajendra Park and on the employee's village in the archive of the Rue de Sèvres has allowed this element to go unnoticed in the eyes of many historians, including Tafuri. They also ignore that the Capitol Complex would have been articulated with a site for leisure, accessible not only to direct employees of the governor, but also to all Punjabis and their families.

27. Rémi Papillault, *Chandigarh et Le Corbusier, Création D'une Ville En Inde 1950-1965* (Toulouse: Poésis, 2011), 198.

28. Papillault, *Chandigarh...*, 198-201.

29. *Le Corbusier: Les Dernières Œuvres (The Last Works)*, ed. by Willy Boesiger (Zürich: Artemis, 1969), 87.



**FIG. 8**  
Capitol Complex in  
Chandigarh, drawing  
CHAND LC 4445 / CAPITOL  
(drawn by draftsman  
Germán Samper on 5 June  
1952, 1: 1000 scale. Source:  
FLC 05151.

**FIG. 9**  
General localization  
scheme of the Village du  
Gouverneur, drawn by  
Le Corbusier. Source: FLC  
31140 (1953).

## Absences and clumsiness: reasons for an alleged failure

In addition to all the previous arguments, it is not possible to realize the spatial richness of the complex without experiencing the void in the way in which the first Chandigarh's inhabitants enjoyed it. This is due to the countless third-party alterations that the project underwent during the decades in which its execution was prolonged, following the three initial schemes<sup>30</sup>. The Capitol Complex, in Punjab's vibrant capital, has been the main victim of the logic of terror that now dominates urban life in this city. A chronicle published in the French newspaper *La Tribune*, discusses not only the limitations that have been imposed in this city during recent years, but also the energy that once invaded it: "To access the Capitol, originally designed as a Greek agora open to the people of Chandigarh, you have to show your claws, fill out a form, pass a bag X-ray, cross a high barbed wire fence under military escort and suffer an umpteen amount of identity checks. The place has become a real bunker, the authorities say; an international terrorist risk. Inside the administrative perimeter, only a few touches of bright colors are there to remind us of the madness of the project launched by Nehru after the independence of India."<sup>31</sup>

The testimony of a local filmmaker quoted in the same article offers a nostalgic echo of the quality of urban life before the division of local power between the States of Haryana and Punjab: "The world is changing and Chandigarh could not escape, but the city is losing authenticity. Before, we had Sector 17 and its pedestrianized streets for shopping, going to the movies or having dinner at the restaurant. All that is over"<sup>32</sup>. Unfortunately, the filmmaker's assertion contradicts the scenario of sector 17 right before the lockdown due to the Coronavirus breakout: the sector's buoyant life forecasted how the Capitol would look today, even in its unfinished state, without its trenches and, open both to tourists and to the citizens of Chandigarh. With the admittance of this work in UNESCO, a new hope for the Capitol Complex as welcoming of the citizens emerged; today, such

30. The fundamental reason for the existence of these three versions is the overwhelming scale of the project's first proposal, according to Le Corbusier and Nehru, considering the tight budget and the domestic nature of the program. Le Corbusier, *Le Modulor 2: La Parole Est Aux Usagers* (Paris: Éditions de l'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui, 1955), 234.

31. Stéphane Picard, "Inde: le rêve évaporé de Chandigarh", *La Tribune*, July 30<sup>th</sup>, 2015, accessed on July 4<sup>th</sup>, 2020, <https://www.latribune.fr/regions/smart-cities/inde-le-reve-evapore-de-chandigarh-463575.html>.

32. Picard, "Inde...".

situation seems even more remote, due to the global pandemic that is still going on in 2021. Huge steps are required in order to bring urbanity back to the Capitol, as the one evoked by Högner: “What attracted me to this city was not simply its architecture, but its fusion of Indian social life with Modernist buildings. [...] They have adapted and appropriated the newly built environment shaped by the artistic vision of a foreigner. And they have filled it not just with life but their own and Indian life.”<sup>33</sup>

Finally, the complex has also been a victim of one of the greatest evils of the 21st century – real estate speculation in favor of gigantic financial ventures. *La Tribune*'s chronicle concludes by quoting none other than Manfredo Tafuri's publication. Tafuri, together with Francesco Dal Co, had published in the Milanese magazine *Architettura contemporanea* (1976), an article prophesizing that Chandigarh would constitute “the sign of an abandonment of the sick conscience of a bourgeois universe that wonders without ever knowing how to answer, the reasons for its own shipwreck”. This is a relative shipwreck, since most of the sectors of the city still benefit from the urban intensity that was denied to the Capitol Complex.

Architecture and cities are the product not only of its designers, but also of the interactions between its inhabitants, its political protagonists. The Capitol Complex in Chandigarh looks empty because it is empty – because the people whose urban practices inspired the Capitol, have restricted passage. Travelers were only allowed to enter in small groups, accompanied by guides, limiting their full enjoyment of the place. When everyone can walk on the esplanade without restrictions – except the ones imposed by the “New Normal” rules in the public space for which the Complex would easily adapt, such as social distancing (amongst others) –, the Capitol will show that, even when unfinished, it could still be the most vital scenario of the *eight hearts* or sectors that Le Corbusier dreamed for this city. A place where the new *City* is re-created while drawing on the same elements of the historic city.

33. Bärbel Högner, et al., *Chandigarh. Living with Le Corbusier* (Verlag: Jovis, 2010), 72; 73.

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**FIG. 10**  
Chandigarh Master Plan  
presented by M. N. Sharma:  
Le Corbusier, *The Last*  
*Works* (1970).