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Preamble

In her text “Modern Designs: History and Memory in Le Corbusier’s Chandigarh,” published in 2016, historian Nabaparna Ghosh argues that proper attention has not been paid to the bas-relief symbols, which are in no specific order, in the concrete of several monuments that make up the Capitol Complex in Chandigarh. She writes:

[a]lthough scholars are unanimous that the modern spaces of Chandigarh marked a break with the past, cosmic symbols etched on the buildings recount a different story. Often overlooked, these symbols and images had mythic contents drawn from the Hindu scriptures.¹

Ghosh relies on testimony statements written by Balkrishna Vithaldas Doshi (1927-2023) to support the idea that Le Corbusier (1887-1965) had established a relationship with Hindu traditions in the planning and construction of Chandigarh and its government complex. Indeed, in his 1996 text “Le Corbusier: The Indian Incarnation,” Doshi writes:

Often to explain [his designs for the High Court in the Capitol Complex], he would open his sketchbook and tell me the stories about his stay in Chandigarh or his visits to nearby villages. He would show the drawing of a local charpoy, Punjabi women with a child, a large mango tree and large-winged birds flying across the vast empty sky. He would say “Doshi – don’t you have such birds flying in your house and making nests in the cap of the ceiling fan? Isn’t your way of living with everything around similar?” It would be my turn then to tell him about how I understood our culture, customs, rituals and our family life.²

¹ Ghosh 2016: 221.

² Doshi 2019: 193.

According to Ghosh, “the importance of Hindu influences in Le Corbusier’s plans cannot be ignored. It marked a culmination of his efforts to integrate architecture with the landscape and, through it, fuse the universal with the particular.”³ The pathway to this culmination of efforts frequently seems to be forgotten, particularly the more profound and dense aspect thereof, which is the result of an at all times uneasy and controversial life, but also one of total commitment to thinking about architecture, which reveals itself as telluric in terms of how it is developed. In far-off India, that thinking, which runs through a body of work always in tumult, always becoming, leaves the timeline of references unclear.

This chapter explores the significance of the constellation of symbols brought together by Le Corbusier, which are most evident in Chandigarh. Symbolic imagery is a common precedent in Le Corbusier’s work. In Chandigarh, however, given the amplitude and significance of the works there, the symbolic universe emerges as an uncommon precedent for understanding his work.

Matter

How is it possible to acknowledge on our insignificant timeline the magnitude of the scale, power and energy of the tectonic mass of the Indian sub-continent moving towards another tectonic plate, in this case, the Eurasian one? How can one imagine these two masses coming up against each other? Even if one recognises the Himalayas, this ominous presence, as the result of that collision, this event, which occurs imperceptibly over time, does not seem proportional to either its cause, the fragmentation of the super-continent Gondwana, or its effect, the formation of the largest and highest mountain range above sea level. These are matters of geology, but also matters for the imagination. How can one possibly understand the constant geological mutation inherent in the planet if one cannot visualise it in one’s dreams? What are the colossal mineral plates that constantly move against the Earth’s mantle? What are the plates that go underneath others and fold in descending and ascending movements? How should one understand the scarred matter that comes about as a result of these movements?

The territory of what now is India has gone on a journey through time and space with the Indian sub-continent. The scar between the two tectonic plates is now part of the country’s history, as indeed it is of other countries. The territory has given rise to a complex, diverse and age-old culture. As if one lived off the echo of the Himalayas, there is a constant appeal to the earth, to matter, in India. All on one land mass, India is home to all kinds of landscapes: beaches, tropical forests, arid deserts, vast plains and mountain ranges. In the Maharastra region in central India, that diversity led to the construction of Buddhist, Hindu

³ Ghosh 2016: 221.

and Jain temples in the sixth and eighth centuries. Most of these temples were built on rocky outcrops. In his 1971 book, *The Speaking Tree: A Study of Indian Culture and Society*, Richard Lannoy writes: “For a thousand years almost all the most important sculptural monuments [in Indian territory] were *caves*. This is the most singular fact about Indian art, and distinguishes it from that of other civilizations.”⁴ In Lannoy’s view, there was a sense of “primevalness” to these artificial Indian caves.⁵

A Photograph

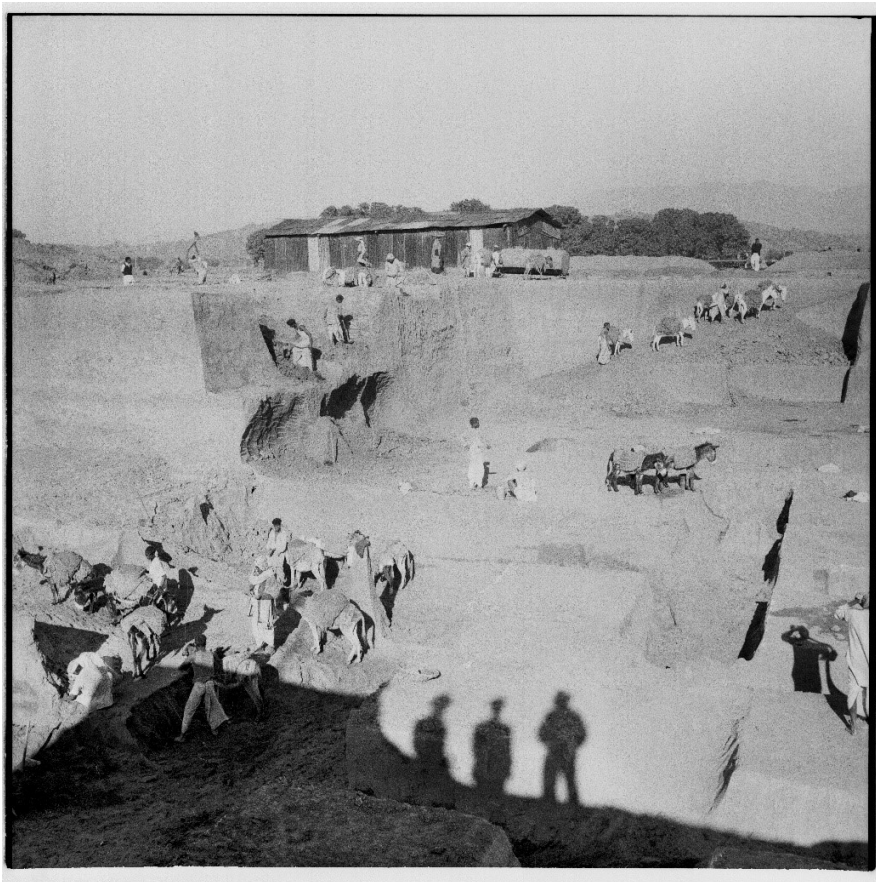


Figure 5.1 Pierre Jeanneret. Excavation of the foundations for the High Court Building (1951-1956), Chandigarh, India (with the shadows of Le Corbusier, Jeet Malhotra and Pierre Jeanneret), 1952. Canadian Centre for Architecture, ARCH264696. Pierre Jeanneret fonds. Canadian Centre for Architecture. Gift of Jacqueline Jeanneret © CCA.

⁴ Lannoy 1971: 31.

⁵ Ibid: 31.

This photograph (Figure 5.1) tells a story of matter and labour. If one pays close attention, one can situate it in terms of time and space, albeit with some uncertainty. It was likely taken in the early twentieth century, in Southern Asia: the clothes and physiognomy of the persons shown would seem to bear this out. The photo shows the shadows of three figures overseeing various activities: digging, involving density in terms of the earth, and the removal of said earth with the aid of loaded donkeys. The digging work is being carried out at a deep level, on what would appear to be a plateau. Based on the silhouettes of their shadows, the figures seem to be wearing Western clothing. They also appear to be assessing the work being carried out. The strong contrast between the shaded areas and the rest of the image leads one to believe that all the work was carried out under a scalding sun. On the horizon, one recognises what appears to be a mountain range, almost as a smear, closing the image towards the sky. The mountains form a counterpoint to the shadows of the three figures. This is an image of contrasts; it is an image that begins a story that builds on the relationship between the positive and the negative, the matter and the lack thereof.

30° 44' 17.7720'' N - 76° 45' 54.5184'' E

In the first minute of August 15, 1947, India affirmed its independence from the British Raj. Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1964) was to be the prime minister of a sovereign India – a country with faith in the future marked by political and religious tensions. In affirming the country as a nation geared towards progress, Nehru also sought the support of Western architects. With the birth of the new capital of Punjab, Chandigarh emerged as a city in the foothills of the Sivalik range of the Himalayas, located 240 kilometres north of New Delhi.

In January 1950, the American urbanist Albert Mayer (1897-1981), together with his collaborator, the Polish architect Matthew Nowicki (1910-1950), was chosen to head the team of designers for the new state capital. The former capital, Lahore, had been annexed by the British Raj in the mid-nineteenth century and had played a central role in the political decisions that led to the Partition of India and the resulting independence of Pakistan; it then became the capital of Pakistani Punjab. However, the partnership between the two USA-based designers was to be short-lived. Nowicki tragically died in a plane crash in Egypt in the summer of that year, and Mayer opted to terminate his involvement in the project.⁶ In December of the same year, Le Corbusier assumed responsibility for designing Chandigarh, leading a team of architects.⁷ Le

⁶ Ghosh 2016: 221. Casciato 2024a: 9.

⁷ The team included Swiss architect Pierre Jeanneret (1896-1967), British architects Maxwell Fry (1899-1987) and Jane Drew (1911-1996). These were joined by nine Indian architects: Manmohan Nath Sharma (1923-2016), A. R. Prabhawalkar (1923-1974), Bhanu Pratap Mathur (1926-1976), Piloo Mody (1926-1983), Urmila Eulie Chowdhury

Corbusier arrived in India for the first time on February 21, 1951.⁸ The city of Chandigarh began to be designed based on a grid; it was to be crowned by an area devoted to the political and judicial powers. That area, which corresponds to the Capitol Complex designed by Le Corbusier, features three buildings: the High Court, the Secretariat Building and the Palace of the Assembly.

Line of thought

“Nothing is transmissible but thought.”⁹ These words begin the *Mise au point* that Le Corbusier wrote in July 1965, a month before his death. This text, supposed to be a stocktaking of his life, became one of his final writings. The first paragraph of *Mise au point* says:

Over the years a man gradually acquires, through his struggles, his work, his inner combat, a certain capital, his own individual and personal conquest. But all the passionate quests of the individual, all the capital, that experience so dearly paid for, will disappear.”¹⁰

On the other side of the timeline, at the age of 22, Charles-Édouard Jeanneret, who later took on the pseudonym Le Corbusier, on his first visit to Paris from 1908 to 1909, paid visits to the Museum of Decorative Arts, the Guimet Museum, the Trocadéro Museum of Ethnography and the Louvre.¹¹ At these museums, he was to make drawings in his notebooks of works and artefacts of diverse origins: Persian carpets; Khmer statuettes; Hindu motifs; Japanese furniture and statuettes; African sculptures and motifs; Peruvian pots; and Egyptian jewellery, statuettes and motifs. In the drawings done in the Louvre, one finds coins and medals from Ancient Greece and Assyrian ink stamps. These registrations, done in minute detail in pencil accompanied by short notes, show events in the skies – stars, the waning moon – and winged figures, various types of animals, ears of wheat and labyrinths.¹² Most drawn artefacts are bordered by irregular oval shapes. As moments of curious introspection about other people, places and times, irrespective of their physical existence, the drawings lead the observer to a certain line of thought that intertwines with the timeline.

(1923-1995), Narinder S. Lamba (1922-1978), Jeet Lal Malhotra, J. S. Dethé and Aditya Prakash (1924-2008). Prakash 2002: 96.

⁸ Casciato 2024a: 11.

⁹ Le Corbusier 1997: 83.

¹⁰ Ibid: 83.

¹¹ Pauly 2019: 134.

¹² The drawings are published in Pauly 2019: 171.

In *Mise au Point*, the same reflective text on his life, amidst a certain self-commiseration, Le Corbusier points out that towards the end of 1951 in Chandigarh, he was to find all-important joys associated with Hindu principles, such as:

a brotherhood of relationships between the cosmos and all living things: stars, nature, sacred animals, birds, monkeys, and cows, and in the villages, children, adults, and still active older people, the pond and the mango trees, all present and all smiling, poor but in proportion.¹³

For Le Corbusier, proportion seemed to be inscribed in the “brotherhood of relationships” and can be seen as a line of thought in time. “Nothing is transmissible but thought”, remember. Thought is understood here as a personal conquest that takes place over time – “[e]verything is harmony, relationships, presences, and also thundering synthesis, an unleashing, a trigger, a flash of lightning for the sight, intervention, catalysis.”¹⁴

In early twentieth-century Paris, 42 years before he arrived in Chandigarh, Le Corbusier sketched the first ideas of his unusual thoughts on his museum visits, armed with a notebook and pencil. In 1925, Le Corbusier opened up a path towards the idea that “destruction by time” could provide a place where everything meets, a meeting place for differing perspectives, differing periods and spaces that bring one close to creating an absolute place for memory, when he wrote in *L’Art décoratif d’aujourd’hui*: “Let us imagine a true museum, one that contained everything, one that could present a complete picture after the passage of time, after the destruction by time [...]”¹⁵

Flesh

The photograph at the beginning of this text was taken in Chandigarh in 1952 during the earth removal work to construct the High Court Building in the Capitol Complex (Figure 5.1). The figures in the shadows are Jeet Malhotra, Pierre Jeanneret and Le Corbusier, who reveals himself in a very striking posture, wearing a wide-brimmed hat. Earth removal for the foundations of a work of architecture is a natural, common thing. Nevertheless, the situations presented by this image give rise to interpretations that are not so usual. The depression caused by the digging work becomes an expression of the weight. The matter, earth, presents itself as a dense mass where lightness does not come into it. The space resulting from the

¹³ Le Corbusier 1997: 89.

¹⁴ Ibid: 83.

¹⁵ Le Corbusier 1987: 16.

extraction of the matter is also impregnated with weight. The earth is turned over and removed in a process that assumedly involves the hand. Through a shadow that goes well beyond them, the three overseers leave their mark on that earth, burying in it their beings, their weight, in particular, the weight of Le Corbusier. The weight functions as a negative. It is a mould, like a hand impression – like the pressure of a hand, a stamp. The image thus results in an unusual impression: the impression of flesh on flesh.

The archaic past

In 1950, Le Corbusier began designing the Chapel of Notre-Dame du Haut in Ronchamp. Le Corbusier wrote that it represented “Liberté” (freedom).¹⁶ Totally free architecture. A veritable phenomenon of visual acoustics. That freedom affected one visitor in 1955: “The sacred building stood in the landscape like an extraterrestrial object, leaving the viewer unsure if its forms emanated from the future or from the archaic past.”¹⁷ The chapel was received with apprehension by the Roman Catholic Church. It became a controversial work to the extent that believers were not advised to visit. There was a feeling of two-fold sacrilege in relation to the chapel. Niklas Maak writes that the pilgrimage chapel was

an affront to the traditions of the church, but also to the dogmatists of an architectural rationalism that cemented Le Corbusier’s *bon mot* of the house as a ‘machine for living’ with buildings that were becoming ever more apparatus-like in character.¹⁸

In its final look, the chapel evokes Le Corbusier’s travels to “less appropriate” places around the world as a Christian image. The truth is that previous experiences with the famous south wall were more outrageous. The world is there in the wall that was built. And the world that is there is essentially a primal one, an archaic past. It is a world not alien to a certain sense of good abandonment that pervades Le Corbusier’s later works, such as the Chapel of Notre-Dame du Haut. This fascination with the primal can be seen more emphatically in the fenestration study carried out in 1950-1951 in a plaster model for the south wall of the chapel (Figure 5.2), where minute perforations transpire in a huge mass of matter.¹⁹ A ‘pagan’ constellation marked by a small bull-shaped orifice. A cavernous, throbbing thing. Flesh.

¹⁶ Le Corbusier 1990: s.p.

¹⁷ Maak 2007: 299.

¹⁸ Ibid: 302.

¹⁹ The eastern wall of the chapel confirms Le Corbusier’s fascination with the primal, with 15 points of light arranged like stars around an image of the Virgin Mary. Feuerstein 2019.



Figure 5.2 Le Corbusier. Model of the south wall, Chapel de Notre-Dame du Haut, Ronchamp, France, c.1950–1951. Plaster, 12,7 × 21,6 × 38 cm. © Drawing Matter Collections, DMC 1439.

Returning to flesh

Le Corbusier used pencil rubbers to make small devices that could be used as ink stamps. During his work in Chandigarh, he used them to mark his drawings with the dates of his stays in India, more precisely in Chandigarh. José Oubrierie (1932-2024), a collaborator of Le Corbusier's in the latter years of his life, referenced a “Calendrier des Signes.”²⁰ In the *Calendrier*, there are at least nineteen types of numerated ink stamps used by Le Corbusier.²¹ One finds non-homogenous and abstract ink marks: “L-C”, a constant presence; stars or perhaps the sun; diagonals; crosses; irregular marks. They are part of a set of marks that, once more, evoke time immemorial – they are his individual and personal conquest. The rubber is now the matter. It is pressed by the hand against the paper. When one observes the footage and photographs taken by Le Corbusier in Le Piquey, France, in 1936, one is confronted with that which Tim Benton refers to as a revisitation of the iconography of Le Corbusier's photographs²²: “Working with a particular theme or motif – footprints, ripples, patterns of pebbles or shells – he would take dozens or hundreds of images, each

²⁰ Oubrierie 2021.

²¹ The *Calendrier* is archived at the Fondation Le Corbusier, Paris.

²² Le Corbusier's interest in objects he found essentially on beaches – see also the famous *objets à réaction poétique* – had existed ever since the late 1920s, thus confirming a common thread with his thoughts. See also Soares and Gonçalves 2016: 77-100.

one bringing a different emphasis of light and shape.”²³ The hand presses the rubber against the paper, just like the foot presses the grains of wet sand, leaving behind an imprint of the image.

After the many bas-relief marks left in the raw concrete of the Unité d’Habitation (1945-1952) in Marseille, generally associated with the basic design principles and the Modulor,²⁴ in the Notre-Dame du Haut chapel, one also finds the small mark of a seashell, also in bas-relief, on one of the pre-shaped concrete panels on the east door of the chapel. That solitary mark is an inkling of the profusion of marks that were to be found in Chandigarh.

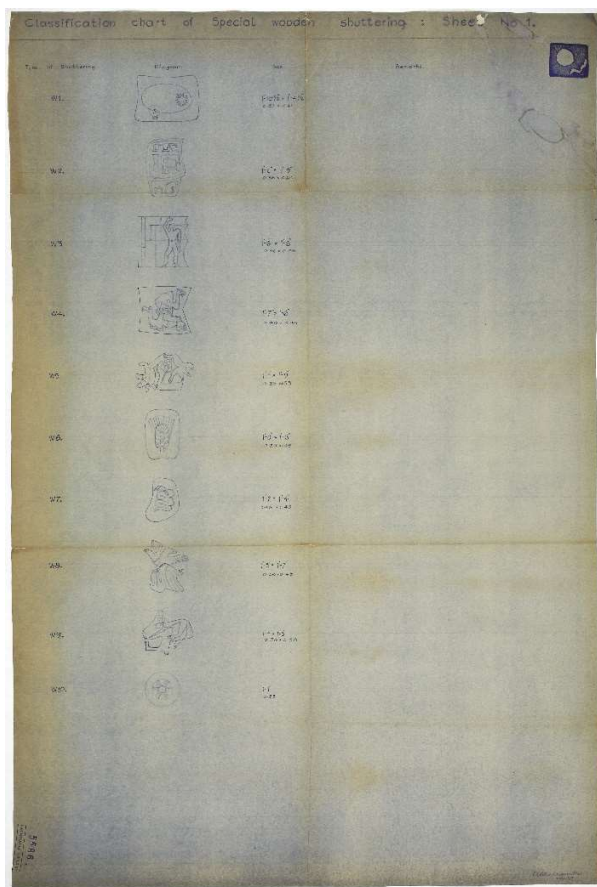


Figure 5.3 Le Corbusier. “Classification chart of wooden shuttering: sheet no. 1”, 1958. Print on paper, 102 x 68 cm. Fondation Le Corbusier, FLC 5586. © Le Corbusier/FLC/ADAGP/SPA, Portugal, Lisbon, 2025)

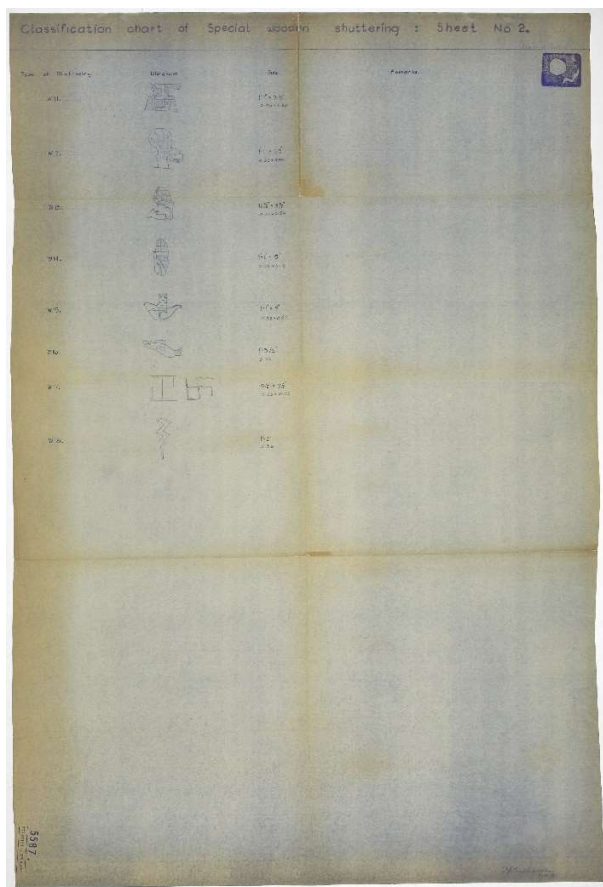


Figure 5.4 Le Corbusier. “Classification chart of wooden shuttering: sheet no. 2”, 1958. Print on paper, 102 x 69 cm. Fondation Le Corbusier, FLC 5587. © Le Corbusier/FLC/ADAGP/SPA, Portugal, Lisbon, 2025)

²³ Benton 2013: 306.

²⁴ Le Corbusier 2000.

A two-page list of these marks tells us that at least eighteen such stamps, or sculptures, as was written by hand on the back of each photograph of the moulds and marks left in a negative state in the concrete, were left around the city, particularly in the Capitol Complex. The “Classification chart of wooden shuttering: sheet no. 1 & no. 2” (Figures 5.3 and 5.4) offers small basic drawings of what was used as moulds that were to be attached to the back of concrete surfaces so that vestiges thereof can be registered there: stars and orbits; hands; open hands; doves; ears of wheat; camels; snakes; fishes; bulls; and the Modulor. Many of these marks are bordered by an irregular oval area. To test these images, many moulds were made in the wet, sandy earth in and around Chandigarh (Figure 5.5).



Figure 5.5 Jeet Malhotra. View of a bas-relief of an open hand sign by Le Corbusier and an unidentified right hand. Mould test on wet sand for the Assembly, Capitol Complex, Sector 1, Chandigarh, India Chandigarh, India, c. 1956. Canadian Centre for Architecture, ARCH402411. Pierre Jeanneret fonds. Canadian Centre for Architecture. Gift of Jacqueline Jeanneret © CCA.>

In their informality, the moulds are reminiscent of carefree themes and experiences along the lines of those in Le Piquey while at the same time reminding one of the depressions caused by digging in the sandy earth of Chandigarh. The moulds were rudimentary, experimental, made by hand – by the weight of the hand. They are a flesh-on-flesh impression. Once refined, the moulds were pressed against the flesh, which is the concrete. There they remained. Through them, the drawings of the coins and ink stamps from other centuries and other civilisations that the young Charles-Édouard Jeanneret made with his sharpened pencil in 1909 live on. Almost fifty years later, one re-encounters the bas-reliefs of Chandigarh. One also re-encounters the primal and ‘pagan’ rehearsed spirit of the chapel of Notre-Dame du Haut – the orifice in the mass, in the flesh.

In Chandigarh’s Capitol Complex, the buildings seem to come out of the earth and go straight upwards in an ascending movement. They emerge from a plateau that seems to extend to the uprightness of the immeasurable vertical mass of the Himalayas. Extraction and compression, the positive and the negative, confront each other. In the bodies of the Secretariat Building, the High Court and the Palace of the Assembly, the marks of Le Corbusier’s “wild thoughts,”²⁵ to use an expression by Rémi Baudouï, are inscribed, here and there, in scratched form. These are the most well-known markings. But there are many others on other structures in the city. Baudouï draws attention to the naturalistic conception of existence, the organicist’s interpretation of society and the mysticism and syncretic paganism underlying Le Corbusier’s work. All of this protects Le Corbusier from a deterministic interpretation of history.

What remains?

What remains? The line of thought. The thought that runs through a body of work that is always in tumult, always becoming. The becoming part leaves a timeline of references for that body of work, which is unclear. The line ceases to be a line and becomes a vibration, echoing multiple references: common and uncommon. The echoes convoke imaginary ancestors, lost in time, who meet in earth-related matters, which come “out of earth’s soft and turbulent core,” to quote Indian poet Meena Alexander.²⁶ In Chandigarh, earth-related matters are brought to life in the architecture of Le Corbusier. Eugène Claudius-Petit (1907-1989), the French Minister of Reconstruction and Urbanization who recommended Le Corbusier to the officials of the Indian delegation in charge of finding an architectural advisor for the new capital of Punjab, would confirm this notion:

²⁵ Baudouï 2019: 253.

²⁶ Alexander 2001: 146.

If you engage with August Perret, you will have a classical-modern architecture, very much of its time. If you engage with [Eugène] Beaudouin, you will also have something very classical. Now, if you engage with Le Corbusier, you will have an architecture that will come from the earth, that will come from the landscape... It will be something that will be born there.²⁷

The words by B. V. Doshi about his mentor take us to the scene of a practice, echoing original intentions. These are the echoes of Le Corbusier's footprints in the sand at Le Piquey and his hands pressing the rubber stamps on the paper, as if Le Corbusier made a statement about the opposing forces in a state of equilibrium between something pressed into the ground (the earth), and something rising from it. Through B. V. Doshi, we can accompany Le Corbusier and his team to locations close to the new city he was building in the Punjab. The many black-and-white photographs of Pierre Jeanneret and Jeet Malhotra taken during the construction period in Chandigarh illustrate the density of the surroundings, the temperature and the *colour*.²⁸

Jeanneret's images narrate a way of life marked by the hardships of work, a close rapport with nature, simple pleasures and diversions. He also documented the people's capacity for aesthetic creation, photographing the objects they produced, their decorations, tools, furnishings, and clothing. [...] [H]is photographs suggest a gaze conditioned by curiosity, but of a kind that is always benign and compassionate rather than invasive.²⁹

We enter little terracotta houses; we experience their spaces that have been darkened to protect from the pervasive heat; we see clothes drying; we hear the noise made by the diverse animals that always share the spaces with the humans. We feel the sun on our backs, on our faces. We gather under the shade of a large mango tree, sitting on a *charpoy*, while we watch women wrapped in the colourful textiles of their saris walking with their children in the dust. We feel the mass of the Himalayas, an insurmountable barrier, as we watch a bird in flight. "Doshi – don't you have such birds flying in your house and making nests in the cap of the ceiling fan? Isn't your way of living with everything around similar?"³⁰ We imagine Le Corbusier, in his informal Western clothes, bending down to the sand and leaving an imprinted drawing

²⁷ Claudius-Petit 1989: 18. Quoted in Casciato 2024a: 10.

²⁸ The photos are part of the "Pierre Jeanneret Fonds, series Photographies = Photographs" (AP156.S4), currently at the Canadian Center for Architecture, Montreal.

²⁹ Casciato 2024b: 54.

³⁰ Alexander 2001: 146.

there, a drawing he has been carrying with him for decades and which he may have rediscovered in the tumult of matter, in the fabrics of another civilisation.

Throughout his life, Le Corbusier builds collections and unfolds his thoughts. These are a reminder of the complexity of the world in which he immersed himself and to which he returned with each new commission. The complexity of Le Corbusier's world reflected the way he embraced the diversity thereof, transcending common distinctions. As said by Remi Baudouï, “for Le Corbusier, there is no such thing as a primitive society in the common sense of the term. [...] His conception of societies, his mysticism and his syncretic paganism prevent him from formulating any deterministic interpretation of History.”³¹ The uncommon attracted Le Corbusier, not by whim but by the ability to open up new meanings. He always added unusual elements to his collections or what we would call ‘uncommon precedents.’ He harvested all signs and symbols from this “true museum.” The museum ended up becoming alive in the foothills of the Himalayas.

In Chandigarh's Capitol Complex, the proliferation of symbols embedded as negatives, in the matter, the concrete, point to this becoming. Matter becomes flesh. Here, one can identify uncommon references to Hindu principles—references to a return to a primal world.

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³¹ Baudouï 2019: 253. Translation by Authors.

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