

# Chandigarh Heritage Furniture



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By Ariadna Alvarez Garreta

**T**he history of Chandigarh is well known by all but I will make a brief introduction in order to contextualize the political background and the proposed urban scheme by architects Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret in 1950.<sup>1</sup>

In 1947 when India got its independence as a former British colony driven by a new breed of young and local politicians led by Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nerhu,<sup>2</sup> they had to accept the division of the country in two, India and Pakistan, thus giving response to the creation of a new Muslim state. Along with the creation of a new frontier, the union of the great Indian motherland had been one of the fundamental principles of Gandhi during the struggle for independence. These facts not only led to his murder in 1948, but also became a great human drama with an important exodus of refugees, confronting religious communities that had lived peacefully for centuries. The Sikhs were left in the hardest hit by the fragmentation of their territory, Punjab, and the loss of its capital Lahore, which became part of the new state of West Pakistan.

The new 20<sup>th</sup> century India was provided with a constitution and it was established as a federal republic, currently comprising 28 states and 7 territory unions (Chandigarh as the capital of Punjab and Haryana being one of these unions). The new government with Nerhu as prime minister wanted to compensate the people of Punjab due to the “partition”<sup>3</sup> with the creation of a new capital, which in turn would symbolize the new spirit of the Indian nation. A socialist, secular country that wanted to be prosperous and modern with a delicate balance between the weight of tradition and the new trends which came from Europe and that Nehru, who had studied in England, wanted to import. With this spirit, the new government began to make international contacts to design the project of the new city. It wanted an architect involved in the most advanced planning theories of the time. The commission went to Albert Meyer who made a proposal, but eventually he had to leave its construction in 1950

when his collaborator Matthew Nowicki, the architect who had to implement the project in India, died in a plane crash. As a result, Nerhu’s commission continued searching for an architect and finally Le Corbusier was chosen. Once he accepted, the commission proposed Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew, English architects and members of CIAM, to carry out the basic ideas of Meyer’s master plan, teaming up with Le Corbusier. From that moment, a “great architecture adventure” began. Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret started working and gave Meyer’s preliminary proposal an important shift. In 1951, once the construction works began, Jeanneret traveled to India where he lived until 1965, overseeing the project and designing the city’s new public buildings (housing and facilities) together with Fry and Drew. Jeanneret was named chief architect of the state of Punjab and first director of the school of architecture of Chandigarh. With the creation of a technical office to carry out the projects, eventually Jeanneret also designed some private houses, street furniture and even the furniture inside the buildings. Although Chandigarh is linked to Le Corbusier due to the urban planning and the buildings of the Capitol complex, the footprint of the tandem between Jeanneret and the Fry–Drew team goes far beyond as reflected for example in different housing typologies and the design of interesting furniture collections. These have been seldom described and evaluated, perhaps partly due to the lack of attention that the authorities have towards Chandigarh’s heritage.

### **A New Architecture for a New City**

The architects of the Modern Movement were convinced that the new architecture would lead to a new way of life, an opportunity to create a new fairer and more egalitarian society. Following these topics, Le Corbusier and Jeanneret fully agreed with Nehru—who had a socialist ideology and a political commitment for public services which would make a city for everyone. The planning of the city followed this philosophy, making one of main characteristics of the city that, on paper, there is no spatial division between social classes. Inhabitants are divided into sectors<sup>4</sup> (districts) according to the location of the different housing typologies allocated to public

< Chair by architect **Aditya Prakash**. Photo by Ariadna Alvarez, 2012.

employees, from judges, high and medium class government employees and reaching the less skilled workers. Each sector has public and private housing so that, with the exception of the high court judges and ministers, and for safety reasons, there is a social mix. The city was launched with government funding, allowing the construction of infrastructure (roads and services), facilities (schools, universities, hospitals, museums, libraries, and government buildings), and part of the housing. The rest of the housing space was reserved for private initiative.

To develop the construction of the city and all its design aspects, a team of architects and engineers was organized: led by Pierre Jeanneret and P. L. Varma as architect and chief engineer of the State of Punjab. Housed in a simple and functional building<sup>5</sup> designed by Jeanneret, a team of local architects worked under the lead of Jeanneret, Fry and Drew. Among this team there was M.N. Sharma, B.P. Mathur, U.E. Chowdhany,<sup>6</sup> A. Prakash, A.R. Prabhawalkar, J.S. Dethe and N.S. Lanbha, as well as G. Rattan Singh who had an important role as a modelist. This team, known as the Capitol Team, made the

construction of the city possible, conducted by the tireless and prolific Jeanneret. They developed projects that ranged from the avenues' large scale to the small scale (choosing the trees for every street), developing different housing typologies and the buildings of the Capitol complex. These architects, disciples of Jeanneret who are unknown outside their country, are the authors of most of the city's buildings once the master left the cabinet and closed the technical office. They also succeeded him as chief architects of the State and deans of the school of architecture of Chandigarh, educating with their legacy the current generation of architects, writing the history of the city and struggling to preserve its architectural heritage (even presenting a candidacy to UNESCO in 2008 with international support). They have been the ones who have left this Modern legacy as a representation of the avant-gardes.

### Furniture

As the buildings were built in the city they needed to be furnished. The local market did not have the appropri-

Figures 1, 2, 3, 4. Different examples of tables and chairs by **Pierre Jeanneret**. Photos by Ariadna Alvarez, 2012.



1



2



3



4



Figure 5. Chair structure by **Aditya Prakash**. Photo by Ariadna Alvarez.



Figure 6. Committee Chair by **Pierre Jeanneret**.

ate furniture as India had hardly developed a tradition of utilitarian furniture, and the most common was derived from the English colonial style. Jeanneret designed for over almost ten years—depending on the needs—a large and varied range of furniture, from seats (chairs, armchairs, sofas, lounge chairs, stools), beds, tables and desks, bookcases and screens, lighting fixtures for the new buildings as well as signage and street furniture. The catalog is extensive and includes more than two hundred models aimed at all types of buildings and locations from university campus to the libraries or private homes, and the public spaces with concrete basins, fountains or bus stops. Le Corbusier was involved in the design of some elements such as the concrete light fixtures of Lake Shukna and the Capitol buildings, the cast iron manhole covers and some metal light fixtures. Jeanneret designed the more utilitarian furniture while Le Corbusier concentrated most of his efforts in the Capitol building (the Assembly or Vidhana Sabha, the Parliament or Hight Court and the Secretariat) and the Yacht Club where he took part in all aspects, from materials to colors. The furniture was often a customization of Jeanneret’s designs, although sometimes they designed it together. The use of color as an element of the design is one of his important contributions.

They are bright and vibrant and we can find them both in architectural elements—like in the three green, yellow and red columns of the Hight Court—in the carpets and chairs inside the Parliament, in all the furniture of the Assembly building and the Emanel Door mural, and in the pillars in the dining room of the Secretariat.

A special peculiarity of Chandigarh’s furniture is that despite being hand-made—as well as the concrete and brick used in the buildings—the designs were thought to be serialized. In Chandigarh we find a symbiosis between avant-garde European culture and local Hindu tradition. Le Corbusier and Jeanneret chose techniques and local materials to build their Modern architecture, concrete for the bigger programs and some urban furniture, brick for housing and solid wood was the predominant material for most of the furniture.<sup>7</sup> Jeanneret experimented with all kinds of materials (wood, iron, bamboo, rattan grille, rope, etc.) in the furniture that he built for his house<sup>8</sup> when he arrived in 1951. This furniture could be called “ethnic” and rudimentary, inspired by local handicrafts. They are unique pieces, prototypes and experiments for his enjoyment and personal use, which soon also occupied the houses of his closest collaborators, leading to the development of a series of large-scale furniture, the *low cost*

furniture, to furnish the city's houses. This furniture was in tune with the 40s and 50s designs' in Charlotte Perriand's *l'Équipement de la Maison*—Modern and cheap furniture with easy and quick manufacturing—the BCB catalog, and Prouvé's *Maison Métallique Préfabriquée*. Furniture designs were simple and functional, with the same 1929 spirit in which Le Corbusier and Perriand presented the LC4 or *chaise longue*, the LC5 chair, and the LC9 stool made of steel tube and skin, at the *Salon d'Automne* in Paris, containing the revolutionary principles of the *Spirit Nouveau*. If architecture had to leave behind artisan procedures and the construction process had to be standardized, also furniture had to be produced serially. But in the 50s, India was not a very industrialized country, and it was not possible to mass-produce furniture. However, Jeanneret designed furniture which met the basic premises: it was economical, easy to implement and fast to produce. At the same time, this furniture adapted to the lifestyle of Hindu culture and its relationship with the furniture.

Hindus perform almost all activities at ground level, and as most of Asia, they have developed other ways to lie. Until the arrival of Europeans in India, the only piece of furniture that they had used was the *charpoy*, the traditional Indian bed with a wood structure and a cotton seating for sitting or to rest.<sup>9</sup> This element is carried from the inside to the outside of houses according to the weather. Jeanneret, who had a great respect for Indian culture, design his own series of charpoy's adapting it to the new homes. Furniture also had to adapt to the human body and he recovered the design of the *Scissors 92 chair*<sup>10</sup> from 1947, and with the local technique, he created the *V-leg armchair* in 1950, a predecessor model of the Chandigarh series. Different models have no name, but they are often designated by their typology (V, X, Y and Z according to the type of leg or structure) or the place for where they were intended (office chair, advocate chair, Senate chair, etc.). Some furniture does receive a name like the *Kangorou lounge chair* (type Z) from 1960, or the easy and cross chairs developed from 1952 to 1956.

Apart from the wooden structure and the straining of the more utilitarian and simple furniture (chairs and desks in the classrooms of the university; the drawing tables, the stools and other furniture of the College of Art; or the entire series developed for libraries that includes tables with reading lamps, exhibitors or files, and the furniture of the technical office of the chief architect), he also designed a series of sofas and armchairs with a skin<sup>11</sup> finishing for the most representative areas such as the meeting rooms and different areas of the High Court or the judges and director's offices for whom he develops a multiple variety of desks, tables and shelves, all with high quality wood and good finishes.

## Chandigarh 1970–2000

We can clearly distinguish two phases in Chandigarh's furniture, an initial one supervised and with the designs of Jeanneret and his team, with well elaborated quality pieces, and a second one once he dies and the technical office is dissolved in the late 60s when the city administration replaces the original furniture for lesser quality pseudo copies with no unified vision. The original furniture is designed for a specific place and that was not followed in this phase, in addition to the carpenters are not faithful to the original designs wood is of lesser quality and the models begin to degenerate. It's the years during which the city falls into oblivion and the administration does not take care of its heritage, leaving the furniture to deteriorate due to the lack of maintenance. The original deteriorated and damaged furniture will be left in storage with no care or simply abandoned in the open. Thousands of original pieces slowly disappear; some are sold by local vintage dealers at absurdly low prices, and others just simply end up broken or even burnt in stoves.

In the late 90s some European and American architects, dealers and gallery owners interested in the Modern Movement period visit Chandigarh to track the furniture and, alarmed by its neglected situation, they begin a recovery operation together with a register.<sup>12</sup> They begin to buy (the Indian administration will host legal sales like the massive one in Punjab University in 1999 or the 2002 sale at the High Court)<sup>13</sup>, furniture to local second hand vendors and the furniture is sent out of the country, where, after it is restored, they will be offered for sale and are currently scattered around the world.<sup>14</sup> Looting also happened with the still in use existing furniture of the Capitol building sold by public officials. These original handmade Jeanneret designs of high quality (mostly made of wood) were very appreciated by Western collectors who paid high prices at auction houses in Europe and the U.S. something that set the alarm among local authorities. Although local architects had insisted for a long time in the safeguard of the heritage of the city, local authorities were not aware of its importance until recently and although belatedly, they have begun to act. From 2011 work began to make an inventory of existing furniture in public buildings, creating the Chandigarh Heritage Furniture Committee (among its members the Dean of the School of Architecture and the College of Arts ), and it is not permitted to remove any element from the city except with a permit from the government. We will have to wait a while to see the effects of these measures

Cultural abandonment has been discussed by those who promoted it and should take care of their heritage, the government of Chandigarh. Unfortunately this is a

utopia in India. If the local administration has not been up to scratch, architects and cultural activists in the city have participated for years in forums and public spaces and have published articles and books on the city which not only is a cultural and architectural heritage but also an active city growing daily. These architects have made this possible but outside India's borders they have not been sufficiently recognized and those who are not with us any longer have been forgotten. Neither Pierre Jeanneret's figure, always an architect in the shade of Le Corbusier has been sufficiently recognized although he was the soul that made Chandigarh possible. After living there fourteen years, his will was that his ashes were fused with the waters of Lake Shukna. This happened three years after his death, a sunny morning in 1970.

### Notes

1. There is an extensive bibliography on this subject. Some of the more recent titles are *Chandigarh's Le Corbusier: The Struggle for Modernity in Postcolonial India* by A. Prakash, and *Chandigarh 1956* with the re-edition of the wonderful photos of the construction of the city by E. Scheidegg.
2. He was prime minister until his death in 1964, with the Congress (Indian National Congress) party which has ruled India for decades and is now governing. Reunified by Gandhi, it also symbolizes the Nerhu-Gandhi saga.
3. Expression with which Hindus refer to the creation of Pakistan in 1947.
4. The city is divided into sectors, each a super-block of 800x1,200m. Each sector has the same mixed typology program of public and private housing with a central area of facilities (shops, schools, community centers, buildings for worship) and green areas. Currently there are 56 sectors, and in the initial phase there were 30.
5. In 1955 Pierre Jeanneret designed a simple building that served as an office for the technical team which had more than fifty people at some moments. It was a provisional building that had to be built up quickly. Fortunately, the building was not demolished (among other factors due to pressure from local and foreign architects) and it is now the headquarters of the *Fondation Le Corbusier*. It is popularly known as the 'Old Architect's Center. It has a small furniture museum with original documents such as sketches, photographs, letters, drawings and models.
6. Women have also played a role in the design and construction of the city. Together with Urmila Eulie Chowdhury and Jane Drew—the only architects who have been recognized in Chandigarh—there was also Minnete De Silva and Gira Sarabhai—although there is not much documentation on this female presence. We do not know the identity of the anonymous women who were part of the labor work and which Le Corbusier himself immortalized in the photos of his *Complete Works* (an image that still remains in India where construction workers do not wear proper work clothes or use safety measures). The name of the city also refers to a woman as Chandi is the name of the Hindu goddess who symbolizes power and *garh* in Hindu means power.
7. India is a country with a tropical climate, with 80 varieties of wood which are ideal for furniture.
8. The house, also designed by him, was one of the serialized built typologies for senior government officials (specifically the 4-J in sector 5). It was also where Le Corbusier lived during his two visits per year.
9. From the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the colonization of the country by England, India produced a wide range of furniture made by local craftsmen, but the designs were imported rather than their own. Different styles will develop of which the best known is the colonial one.
10. The *Scissors 92* chair was designed in 1947 during his American stage, it was manufactured by Knoll, similar to the 40s designs with Perriand. It is a low seat for the living room, spacious dimensions, with a structure of birch wood and foam cushions upholstered with fabric resting on a cotton seat. [http://www.knoll.com/museum/prod\\_museum.jsp?prod\\_id=398](http://www.knoll.com/museum/prod_museum.jsp?prod_id=398)
11. In order to respect Indian culture, all the skin that was used was from cows which were dead; they were not killed.
12. Some of these gallery owners were the French Eric Touchaleaume and G erald Moreau who acquired elements during seven years and then restored them. They recently published an interesting book with many photographs and reproductions of furniture from Chandigarh and it has been one of the references for this article: *Le Corbusier & Pierre Jeanneret. L'aventure Indienne/The Indian Adventure*, Montreuil, Gourcuff-Gradenigo and  ditions Erich Touchaleaume, 2010.
13. According to Moreau and Touchaleaume in *L'aventure Indienne*, the original furniture of Le Corbusier and Jeanneret was also sold in France at the *Cit  Universitaire de Paris* and at the *Maison de Br sil* by Le Corbusier and L cio Costa, in order to replace the furniture with other designs instead of restoring it.
14. This furniture can be found in various international galleries and photographs are easily accessible via the Internet, for example on the website of the Parisian gallery of P. Serguin: [www.patrickseguin.com](http://www.patrickseguin.com).



Figure 7. Cast iron manhole cover by **Le Corbusier**. Photo by Ariadna Alvarez, 2012.

### Ariadna Alvarez Garreta

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