



Le Corbusier, Open Hand, Chandigarh, India; 1955-1972. National Anthem performance on August 15, 2010. Photo-Courtesy: Gurpreet Singh, August Kranti, 2010.

Rereading Our Recent Past: Notes on Chandigarh and New Gournā

BY VINAYAK BHARNE

This article focuses on two iconic architectural works that dominate the ongoing intellectual discourse on conserving our recent past – the City of Chandigarh in India designed by Le Corbusier, and the Village of New Gournā in Egypt designed by Hassan Fathy. By examining the differential between their originating visions and their legacies that were shaped over more than five decades through many unforeseen circumstances and unaccounted consequences, this article provokes deeper reflections on our modern heritage and on the forces and entities that should decide its future.

In the ongoing dialogue on conserving our recent past, two iconic places, designed by two brilliant architects in two different parts of the world at almost the same time, have come to the forefront — the city of Chandigarh designed by Le Corbusier in India, and the Village of New Gournā designed by Hassan Fathy in Egypt. Even though the original intentions shaping these two places were blatantly different, their evolving destinies are raising complex questions on the outlook and praxis of conserving modern landmarks, particularly beyond the West, forming a compelling narrative on the larger rubric of heritage, modernity, and modern architecture. This article does not delve into the histories of these two places, as much as examines the differential between their originating visions and legacies — legacies that were shaped over more than five decades through many consequences and circumstances, largely unforeseen and unaccounted for. By highlighting this differential, the intention is to provoke deeper reflections on how we might reread our recent heritage, on who should define it, on whom it should be conserved for, on who should play a role in these endeavors, and how and by what means they should be accomplished.

Chandigarh and New Gournā — A Historical Overview

When Le Corbusier landed in India for the first time in February 1951 on the invitation of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, the Village of New Gournā was well under way in Cairo. Plans to develop it had begun as early as the mid-1940s reflecting the Egyptian government's desire to relocate the impoverished village of Gournā al-Jadida, an impoverished squatter constructed atop the ancient burial sites of the Theban Necropolis. For generations, the poor residents of Gournā al-Jadida had made their living by looting and selling burial artifacts, which the Egyptian government sought to curtail. In 1945, the Egyptian Department of Antiquities purchased 45 acres of sugarcane fields some

two miles west of the archaeological site and commissioned Hassan Fathy to design and supervise the construction of the new settlement.

New Gournā was a radical departure from the high modernist dogma of the 40s. Instead of using contemporary materials such as steel or reinforced concrete, the village was constructed of handmade, sun-dried mud bricks, an ancient Nubian construction material, used as a means of tempering the sunlight and reducing interior temperatures. As such, it embodied an alternative modernity for a different socio-economic, climatic and cultural context. Fathy consulted with local workmen and a team of Nubian master builders to create buildings sensitive to local rural lifestyles. Buildings were designed of handmade mud bricks and capped by Islamic-style domes. Homes were organized around central courtyards and the entire village was anchored by a main public square with a mosque, educational facilities, and theater. Fathy also expressed great interest in the social structure of the Gournā al-Jadida community, frequently visiting them to observe the social structure. Concluding that Gournā society was organized around two key units: the family and the *badana* or group of families he designed New Gournā's plan with individual family houses arranged in clusters around small squares. Fathy was not merely attempting to create a model settlement for the Gournā people, but seeking to create an international prototype to house the modern world's less privileged.

Le Corbusier on the other hand had a different agenda — almost a mandate from the Prime Minister of India himself to create a city that would break away from the traditions of India's past, and overwhelm newly-sovereign India's colonial complex. Within as less as six weeks of his arrival, Le Corbusier re-planned the city of Chandigarh: He "rationalized" the curved streets of his predecessor Albert Meyer's scheme into an orthogonal grid, re-apportioned its proposed "villages" into "sectors" thrice as large, reduced the quantity of roads, and increased the overall density.

But much of Chandigarh's magnetism lay less in the city plan and more in the Capitol Complex the master architect was so meticulously designing in brutal grey concrete. Set against the Himalayan backdrop, and carefully positioned on Modular proportions, was a dramatic concourse of four colossal and three smaller monuments: with the Secretariat slipped behind it, the Assembly and High Court stood across each other framing the (un-built) Governor's Palace, with the Tower of Shadows, the Geometrical Hill, the Monument to the Martyr, and the Open Hand Monument (built in the 80s) and as smaller players around them. Together they centered on the Esplanade — a 440-meter-long barren expanse of grey concrete stretching between them.

By the time Prime Minister Nehru formally opened the city in October 1953, Le Corbusier's reputation had propelled Chandigarh to international attention. Architects and historians from all over came to witness what would be the largest built project of the master architect, a phenomenon that remains true to this day. New Gourna on the other hand largely escaped the public eye until 1976, and not until Fathy published his memoir for the project, *Architecture for the Poor*, would it attract the global eye. In any case, from today's standpoint, both places bear the parallel of being incomplete utopias that now stand at the epicenter of a serious intellectual discourse about their future, and by extension, the future of other such recently designed iconic places across the world.

Beyond Le Corbusier: Chandigarh Today

Since 2006, the city administration of Chandigarh has been pushing for a UNESCO World Heritage Designation, inspired by Brasilia, Le Havre and Tel Aviv, to celebrate what is a healthy and thriving city, embodying all the qualities of a progressive, prosperous *polis*. Chandigarh has nearly doubled in size over five decades along Corbusier's proposed pattern. It has survived the political upheavals and terrorist threats of the 80s. Its citizens wear an intrinsic civic pride towards India's first modern city. It is known for its education quality, and everyone knows about the man named Le Corbusier. Its markets teem with activity, overwhelming the bland concrete and brick façades with a riot of signage, canvas and color. It is India's first "green" city to ban smoking in public. Chandigarh has its act together — not because of its planning or architecture, but because it has, like many other Indian cities, been appropriated and absorbed by the plebian Indian ethos.

Meanwhile, Chandigarh's Capitol Complex tells a different story. Guard posts, gates and barbed wires enclose the entire precinct today, interrupting the view of the famous Assembly and High Court from the central Esplanade. Trees grow randomly, blocking the same vista of the 240-meter long Secretariat that had not long ago been a carefully conceived visual composition. Secured entry to the Assembly and High Court occurs from the rear parking lots, which also become the setting for hawkers and commerce. Except as a space to admire the buildings, the 440-meter long Esplanade, the open space between the Assembly and High Court remains perpetually empty, with weeds and a

few administrative cars sheepishly parked at its fringe. It stays that way even on India's Independence Day, with the parades happening instead in the field near Sector 17.

So whatever happened to Le Corbusier's Capitol? Circa 1985, some three decades after the Capitol's opening, Chandigarh had been gripped by the paranoia of Sikh terrorists killing people at will. A year ago Prime Minister Indira Gandhi had ordered a military attack on the Golden Temple in Amritsar, the holiest of Sikh shrines, killing hundreds of Sikh terrorists who had amassed weapons within, and eventually leading to her assassination. With everything from state to city wearing a somber garb, emergency security measures were implemented to safeguard the administrative center. Barbed wire fences with guard-posts, gates and gunmen fortified the complex and entry to the Capitol became far more limited than ever before. Today the tortured, protected Capitol represents a helpless victim of unpredictable political circumstances on the one hand, and a mirror reflecting the darker colors of post-colonial India on the other.

Chandigarh's citizens hardly go to the Capitol. Its own link with the thriving city is Le Corbusier's Open Hand monument, not through its original democratic symbolism of being "open to receive, open to give", but its ubiquitous scattering as a two-dimensional imprint throughout the city. From tourist hoardings and garbage bins to pamphlets and driver's licenses, it is the city's official symbol, though one may not exactly know its relevance then versus now. The only consistent inhabitants of the Capitol — besides the diurnal political menagerie, sanitation department workers and thrash collectors, are the villagers of Kansal, the only retained village from the many demolished to build the city. They regularly visited the Complex without any invitation or permission, to wash, bathe, and carry home water for cooking. The lawns surrounding the deserted Open Hand have become their cricket fields and hangouts.

Not that all this has gone un-noticed. Since its founding in 2005, Hum Log (literally "We the People"), a local non-government organization (NGO) has sought to generate a wave of citizen activism through organized campaigns for the cause of the city. The "Free the Open Hand Campaign" organized street theater, debates and conferences at the monument to make it accessible to the public. Thanks to such efforts, since January 2010, the Chandigarh government has lifted the ban on social gatherings at the Open Hand opening it to citizens daily between 10:30 and 3:30 (tourists and other outsiders must still apply to the city's administration for permission to visit). On August 15, 2010, scores of residents led by the same initiative, in an effort to highlight the Capitol's restricted access, sang the national anthem at the Open Hand to mark India's Independence Day. This was a watershed moment in the Capitol's recent history. As a performance of protest, it was not simply a mode of political expression, but also an indication of democratic success. It marked the beginnings of new meanings and identities for the city, taking it beyond its much-touted modernist and Le Corbusian profile, and making it a site of populist contestation, redefinition and reconstruction.

01 Le Corbusier, Assembly Building, Chandigarh, India, 1953-1963. This view from the Esplanade shows the vista interrupted by security fences and guard posts. © 2010 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris/FLC, Vinayak Bharne, 2010.



02 Le Corbusier, High Court Building, Chandigarh, India, 1951-1957. This view from the Esplanade shows the vista interrupted by security fences and guard posts. © 2010 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris/FLC, Vinayak Bharne, 2010.

Some two decades since its fortification, even as city elites were contemplating the city's UNESCO World Heritage designation, the question of who really "owns" Chandigarh has come to center-stage.

Beyond Hassan Fathy: New Gournas Today

Not many know that the even after the village of New Gournas was built, the Gourni people for years refused to transfer to their new homes and remained instead in their old village atop the Pharaonic tombs. It reinforced the naïve assumption in the first place that these people would willingly relocate to an unfamiliar settlement designed entirely by an unfamiliar agency. Many of the Gourni, antagonistic toward the relocation effort (and toward Fathy), began to vandalize the village by breaking its dikes, flooding and damaging the foundations. Construction of the new village ultimately failed mainly because of the Gournis' refusal to move to the new site, and the government's inability to force relocation coupled with political and financial issues. Fathy and the Egyptian government pulled out of New Gournas in 1948, and the project was abandoned following the Egyptian revolution of 1952. The Gourni largely continued to reside in their old village of Gourni al-Jadida. Gradually, squatters took over the neglected New Gournas buildings, and ignoring Fathy's original vision unapologetically altered the village layout and mud brick structures to better serve their daily needs.

Today, New Gournas is in a state of deterioration. Continuing change and appropriation has compromised the material integrity of its structures. A rising water table, lack of an adequate sewer system, extreme heat and *ad-hoc* infill have destabilized many of the mud brick structures, with several on the verge of collapse. Most structures have been substantially altered — residents have covered the courtyards, filled in the wind catchers, and rebuilt collapsed domes in reinforced concrete — all in a manner antithetical to accepted Western historic preservation standards. These issues have aroused serious concern among preservation experts who see in such attitudes, a serious threat to Fathy's architectural master work.

In 2009, UNESCO, ICOMOS and the World Monuments Fund (WMF) announced a rehabilitation initiative titled "Safeguarding Project of Hassan Fathy's New Gournas Village". The partnership between these three agencies was strategic: UNESCO and ICOMOS focused on technical concerns such as materials; the WMF brought in its diplomatic experience on issues of public relations and community development. In addition to placing New Gournas on its 2010 "watch list", that is, its annual list of endangered heritage sites, the WMF also reached out to the Gourni people and sought to educate them on the site's historical and architectural significance. The three agencies together released a report in 2011, but before any rehabilitation work officially began, the entire project came to an abrupt halt and to this day, it is unclear if it will ever resume. The agencies have hinted that the project was stalled because of Egypt's tenuous political climate.

Whether or not this is true is not the point. The point is that the UNESCO, ICOMOS and WMF rehabilitation plan relies heavily on Euclidean methods of conservation — land use zoning, urban design guidelines, building regulations etc. — even though such methods carry minimal weight and efficacy in legally ambiguous nations such as Egypt, and particularly in appropriated places like New Gournas. The rehabilitation plan emphasizes architectural and material integrity and encourages the removal of insensitive modifications to Fathy's buildings. But as Susan Sachs has reported, the people who live in New Gournas claim that Fathy's houses no longer meet their needs. There is an increasing desire to replace the original mud bricks because fired bricks can better withstand the climate. Many of the modifications made to the Fathy structures reflect the residents' desire to have amenities like running water and adequate space to house their extended families — issues not adequately accounted for in the original plan. The question of what heritage means to the Gourni inhabitants, and even more significantly, who "owns" New Gournas, remains at the heart of this discussion.

Who's Heritage?

In many ways, the 2011 UNESCO, ICOMOS, and the WMF's rehabilitation plan for New Gournas is similar to what is currently happening with Chandigarh's UNESCO World Heritage Designation discussions. From the inhabitants' standpoint, New Gournas's rehabilitation plan arrived unwanted and uninvited and sought to impose and insinuate its own conception of heritage and methods of conservation without necessarily taking the residents' needs or interests into account. The agencies took a paternalistic approach to heritage using Western ideals and means to achieve their goals in a distinctively non-Western society. For them heritage could only be fully conveyed in an orderly, antiseptic environment, impeccably restored to its original state.

The same echoes in Chandigarh. The city's future today is the intellectual domain of franchised elite, not be the terrain of the city's inhabitants. In January 1999, to celebrate Chandigarh's 50th anniversary, a distinguished group of international architects gathered in the Capitol. They concluded among other things that Corbusier's original design for the un-built Governor's Palace was far more appealing than his succeeding alternative for the building as the un-built Museum of Knowledge. By December 2007, a year after Chandigarh officials submitted a bid to UNESCO's Paris-based headquarters to make the city a World Heritage site; it was made public that the Chandigarh Administration would build the Museum of Knowledge per the original design of the Governor's Palace, at the same location as initially planned. Who defines authenticity and heritage? Is the construction of the Museum of Knowledge in the form of the Governor's Palace an acceptable "authentication" of Corbusier's original vision? And who actually decides this and why?

Perhaps this has been Chandigarh's missing dimension all along. For all its democratic innuendos, it has evolved through anything but a democratic process. In fact its origins

03 Le Corbusier, Secretariat Building, Chandigarh, India, 1953-1959. © 2010 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris/FLC., Vinayak Bhatne, 2010.



04 Le Corbusier, Open Hand, Chandigarh, India, 1955-1972. National anthem performance on August 15, 2010. Photo Courtesy: Gurpreet Singh, AugustKranti, 2010.



05-07 Hassan Fathy, Village of New Gourna, Egypt, 1946-1952. Deteriorating Village Fabric. © Roland Unger, Wikimedia Commons, 2009.



08 Hassan Fathy, Village of New Gourna, Egypt, 1946-1952. View of Mosque. © Marc Ryckaert, Wikimedia Commons, 2011.

were “non-democratic” to begin with. As Indian architect Romi Khosla has suggested, the making of Chandigarh was in a sense an “Imperial Plan” not too dissimilar from that of colonial New Delhi. Despite their protest, 24 villages and 9,000 residents were displaced by a Euclidean vision. India’s Prime Minister Nehru had the powers of the Viceroy and his dictum for an unabashed modernity, however well intentioned, was never subjected to the litmus test of the native public — just as UNESCO, ICOMOS and WMF sought to do at New Gournna.

Chandigarh and New Gournna then are telling instances of how visions, utopias, noble aspirations and architectural prowess are rarely able to surpass the socio-political vagaries of time. They affirm that architecture and architectural conservation, however masterful, is but a pawn in a complex socio-political game. If the Capitol’s guise from a national monument to a forlorn center, and New Gournna’s natural take-over and appropriation tell us anything, it is that monumentality, social-justice, civic pride are eventually not architectural but socio-political phenomena. The intentions of places can become confused even at their inception, and certainly during their subsequent reception — at once an artistic, political, and anthropological problem. While visionary aspirations are important, the expectations and circumstances of those who inhabit, adopt, appropriate and “own” them are even more critical to their nurturing and long-term future.

The task at hand is to expand the lens through which we read, understand, engage with and ultimately envision the future of such places. Chandigarh and New Gournna should not be mistaken as mere relics for mainstream preservation or heritage designations, but as the seeds of larger evolving visions that are being tested and completed by generations to come. Whether or not Le Corbusier’s city becomes a World Heritage Site, and whether or not, Fathy’s buildings ever get restored, what these places desperately need is a far more reflective examination of their complex cultural narrative. They need a deeper empathetic reassessment of the many other far more important forces and entities — people, their needs, their preferences, their inclinations — that are shaping the identity of these places today. Chandigarh and New Gournna are not dead ruins to be embalmed, designated, restored and glorified. They are living repositories of shifting histories that have gone far beyond their master architects or their original visions. It is these histories that should be brought to the forefront, to dominate the ongoing dialogues on their future. ■

References

- VINAYAK, Bharne, “Le Corbusier’s Ruin: The Changing Face of Chandigarh’s Capitol”, *Journal of Architectural Education*, 64/2, Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture, March 2011.
- HASSAN, Fathy, *Architecture for the Poor: An Experiment in Rural Egypt*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1976.
- AHMAD, Hamid, *Hassan Fathy and Continuity in Islamic Arts and Architecture: The Birth of a New Modern*, Cairo, The American University in Cairo Press, 2010.
- LARA, Iskander, “The Village of New Gournna”, 9 June 2011. Available online at: <http://www.touregypt.net/featurestories/newgournna.htm>
- PANAYIOTA, Pyla, “The Many Lives of New Gournna: Alternative Histories of a Model Community and their Current Significance”, *The Journal of Architecture*, 14:6, 2009, p. 715–730.
- SUSAN, Sachs, “Honoring a Visionary if Not His Vision”, *New York Times*, E:1, 4 April 2000.
- JAMES, Steele, *An Architecture for People: The Complete Works of Hassan Fathy*, New York, Whitney Library of Design, 1997.
- HANA, Taragan, “Architecture in Fact and Fiction: The Case of New Gournna Village in Upper Egypt”, *Muqarnas*, 16, 1999, p. 169–178.
- UNESCO, “New Gournna Village”. Accessed online at: <http://whc.unesco.org/en/activities/637/>
- UNESCO, “Safeguarding Project of Hassan Fathy’s New Gournna Village: A UNESCO Initiative”, April 2011. Available online at: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0019/001925/192524e.pdf>
- WORLD MONUMENTS FUND, “Hassan Fathy’s New Gournna: Past, Present, Future”, October 2010. Accessed online at: <http://www.wmf.org/video/hassan-fathys-new-gournna-past-present-future>

Vinayak Bharne

(b. Goa, India). MSc in Architecture (1998), University of Southern California. Los Angeles based practicing urban designer and planner, adjunct associate professor of urbanism at the Sol Price School of Public Policy and at the School of Architecture at the University of Southern California, in Los Angeles. He is the author of *The Emerging Asian City, Rediscovering the Hindu Temple* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), and *Zen Spaces & Neon Place* (Applied Research & Design, 2014).