

The museum of Ahmedabad, floorplan of main building. FLC 06954A.

# A HIDDEN GEM

## LE CORBUSIER'S PROPOSITION FOR A MUSEUM AND CULTURAL CENTRE AT RAJ GHAT, NEW DELHI

*R. M. Woitschützke*

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**Abstract:** The essay analyses Le Corbusier's involvement in the creation of a Gandhi memorial at Raj Ghat, New Delhi. While demonstrating the relationship between the propositions for New Delhi and Le Corbusier's various plans for cultural centres, the author pays particular attention to the *Museum of Knowledge* which was supposed to be realized at the site. The essay concludes that the Raj Ghat was intended to feature a museum with a programmatic approach similar to the museum of Ahmedabad.

**Keywords:** Le Corbusier; Museology; Gandhi Memorial; Boite à Miracles; Cultural center.

**Résumé :** L'article se veut une analyse de l'implication de Le Corbusier dans la création du mémorial dédié à Gandhi à Raj Ghat (New Delhi). Tout en révélant les liens qui unissent les projets esquissés pour New Delhi et ceux des différents centres culturels de Le Corbusier, l'auteur se focalise principalement sur le *Musée de la Connaissance* prévu pour le site. L'essai se conclut en démontrant la proximité programmatique du projet de Raj Ghat avec celui pensé pour le musée d'Ahmedabad.

**Mots-clé :** Le Corbusier; Muséologie; Mémorial Gandhi; Boite à Miracles; Centre culturel.

**Resumen:** Este ensayo analiza la implicación de Le Corbusier en la creación de un memorial dedicado a Gandhi en Raj Ghat, Nueva Delhi. Demostrando la relación existente entre las propuestas para Nueva Delhi y diversos proyectos de Le Corbusier para centros culturales, el autor presta especial atención al *Museo del Conocimiento* que se suponía iba a construirse en ese emplazamiento. La conclusión es que el Raj Ghat estaba destinado a convertirse en un museo con un planteamiento programático similar al del museo de Ahmedabad.

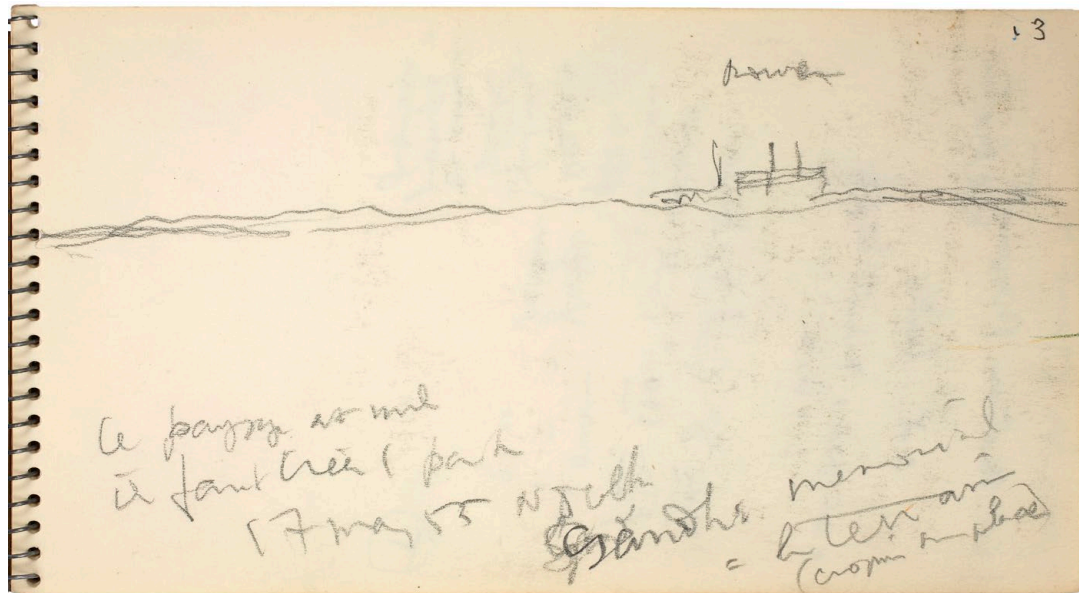
**Palabras clave:** Le Corbusier; Museología; Memorial Gandhi; Boite à Miracles; Centro cultural.

## Introduction

Intended to become a landmark of national significance, the erection of a Gandhi Memorial at Raj Ghat in New Delhi was the subject of controversial public debate in India during the 1950s. Nowadays, the impressive monument which surrounds Gandhi's Samadhi (cremation spot) is well known to many visitors of the city and is recognized as the most important work of Indian architect Vanu G. Bhuta. However, the history of the monument is difficult to reconstruct, and it seems not be well known that Le Corbusier was involved in its creation and had proposed to equip the Raj Ghat with a large-scale cultural centre, consisting of a museum, an exhibition pavilion, and a Boite à Miracles.

I first came across the Raj Ghat during the research for my PhD in which I tried to portray Le Corbusier as an inventor of experimental museological strategies. Similar to Ahmedabad, the museum at New Delhi was supposed to become a Museum of knowledge, a 'tool of modern times' that would confront visitors with the urgent questions of contemporary society. In addition to that, it already foreshadowed several technical aspects that should later find their ultimate expressions in the Philips Pavilion, the Olivetti Centre, and the electronic museum on Chandigarh's Capitol Complex.

In this paper, which is basically an extended version of chapter 5 of my PhD thesis, I will discuss Le Corbusier's involvement in the genesis of the Raj Ghat memorial and try to outline the ambitions which he pursued. To the best of my knowledge, no research has yet been carried out on this subject. Consulted sources include the archives of the Fondation Le Corbusier and the Indian National Library in Kolkata.



**FIG. 1**  
A drawing of the Raj Ghat in Le Corbusier's sketchbook. The word 'power' refers to the factory which is mentioned in the Note regarding the Gandhi Memorial. FLC CA J36-11.

In 1953, Le Corbusier was approached by the Government of India to submit proposals for a memorial at Raj Ghat, a spacious park area on the western banks of the Jamuna river in New Delhi, which houses the *Samadhi* (cremation spot) of India's most prominent political figure, Mahatma Gandhi. At this time, the Government of India felt the pressing need to equip this space of national significance with a monument of appropriate dimensions. Needless to say, as this memorial was supposed to become one of the capital's most prominent landmarks, its design had to be considered with utmost care. A member of the Ministry of Works, Housing and Supply, S. Raganathan, explained the delicacy of this matter in a letter to Le Corbusier:

*Dear Sir,*

*As you may be aware, the question of putting up a suitable Memorial at Raj Ghat has been engaging the attention of Government as well as the public men of India. The difficulties inherent in the selection of a suitable design for Gandhiji's Samadhi at this site could hardly be exaggerated. It has to reflect the spirit of Gandhiji's tea-chings, the simplicity of his life, its fulness and the close communion he had with all that is good in nature and the commonest of men. After a good deal of con-sideration of numerous ideas that were thrown out by a variety of people, three desi-gns, photographs and plans of which are enclosed, were evolved. [...]*

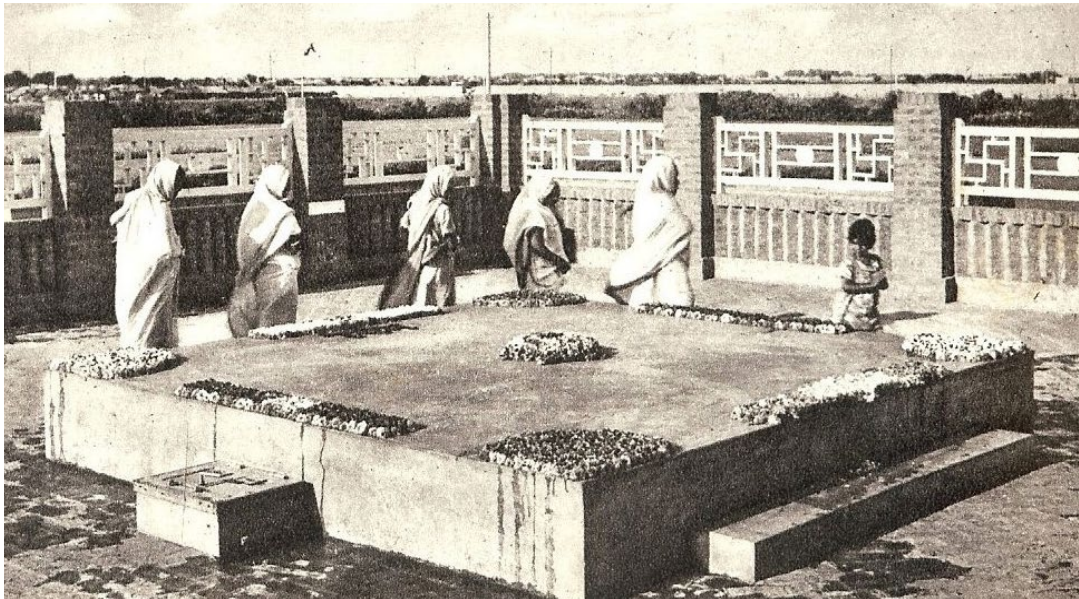
*Before a final decision is taken to accept this particular design, Govern-ment feel that it would be desirable to obtain and consider any comments or sugges-tions that you and a few other eminent authorities may have on these designs.*

*I shall be grateful, therefore, if you would be good enough to find the time to devote some thought to this matter and let me know as early as possible your comments and suggestions. You need have no hesitation in writing to me, if you feel that way, that you do not like the basic principles underlying these designs at all. In that case it would be helpful if you would give us an indication of what you consi-der would be the basis of a good design. [...] It would facilitate matters if you would let us have your comments and suggestions not later than the 10th of Februa-ry 1954.*

*Yours faithfully,*

*S. Raganathan<sup>1</sup>*

1. Letter by S. Raganathan, Ministry of Works, Housing & Supply, to Le Corbusier, 29 December 1953. FLC P2(15)33.



**FIG. 2**  
The first design of the Samadhi as depicted on an undated postcard.  
© Author's archive.

Unfortunately, the sketches and plans which Raganathan mentioned cannot be found in the archives of the Fondation Le Corbusier and it must remain unclear which drawings Le Corbusier received. However, the letter proves that Indian authorities were concerned about the Raj Ghat's future design as early as 1953 and that Le Corbusier became involved in the affair at an early stage of the project. At this time, he was already occupied with numerous projects in Chandigarh as well as in Ahmedabad and it was not before December 1954, almost a year later, that Le Corbusier visited the Raj Ghat for the first time together with his colleague, P. N. Thapar. He summarized his impressions in a paper entitled *Note regarding the Gandhi Memorial* which features a detailed account of his visit. The beginning shall be quoted here:

*On December 9th, 1954, the very day of my departure for France, the Minister of the Public Works, of the Government of India, New Delhi, asked me for an interview to give an account of the actual stage of the Gandhi Memorial at Raj Ghat, New Delhi. He gave me the plans of the site showing the temporary park of the Memorial and asked me to avail myself of my passage in New Delhi that same day to visit the site and examine the question.*

*Last year the Executive Committee of the Gandhi Memorial at Raj Ghat sent me three projects of a mausoleum made by different architects and asked for my comments of these designs. Feeling uneasy about interfering personally in the activity of Indian colleagues I answered briefly to the urgent question put by the Committee saying that I felt in disagreement with these designs which reflect neither Gandhi's spirit nor his teachings and which on the contrary seemed to a stranger like me opposed to Gandhi's simple and unpretentious teachings. [...]*

*I arrived in Delhi in the afternoon and was received by P. N. Thapar and the more actively interested members of the Gandhi Memorial Committee. We went to Raj Ghat and visited the site. These Gentlemen expressed their keen desire to hear my opinion on the subject.*

*I answered that it was impossible to answer point-blank to such a question or make a formal proposition. That on the other hand I had no right to interfere or suggest ideas which might be in disagreement with those of my colleagues interested in this concern<sup>2</sup>.*

Le Corbusier's restraint in this particular case is remarkable. His hesitancy was surely appropriate, as the Raj Ghat was nothing less than a national symbol and hence most unlikely to be created by a non-Indian architect. However, as we shall see on the following pages, the degree of detail in which he went in his suggestions gives reason to believe that he hoped to contribute to the matter to a certain extent.

2. Le Corbusier, Note regarding the Gandhi Memorial, 8 January 1955. FLC P2(15)32-005.

## An unconventional solution

3. See Le Corbusier, *Sketchbooks Vol. 3 1954-1957*, Entry No. 272.

4. Le Corbusier, Note regarding the Gandhi Memorial, 8 January 1955. FLC P2(15)32-006.

Let us try to recall the layout of the Raj Ghat, of which Le Corbusier must have encountered on his first visit to the site in December 1954. He briefly referred to it in his sketchbook (figure 1) where he penned an empty landscape, in combination with the comment: « *Le paysage est nul // Il faut créer 1 parc* » ('There is nothing // One shall create a parc')<sup>3</sup>. This observation is in accordance with photographs of the Raj Ghat from the same period, depicting a spacious but formless terrain of meadow, occasionally dotted with trees and shrubs. At this time, Gandhi's *Samadhi* was merely a square concrete block, surrounded by a simple brick-and-iron balustrade of rather provisional appearance (figure 2). The architect commented on this humble arrangement in his *Note regarding the Gandhi memorial*:

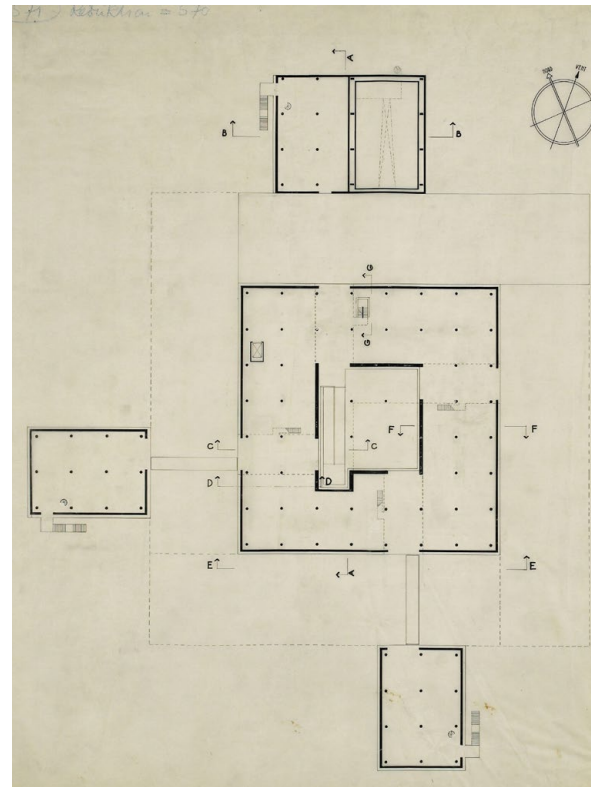
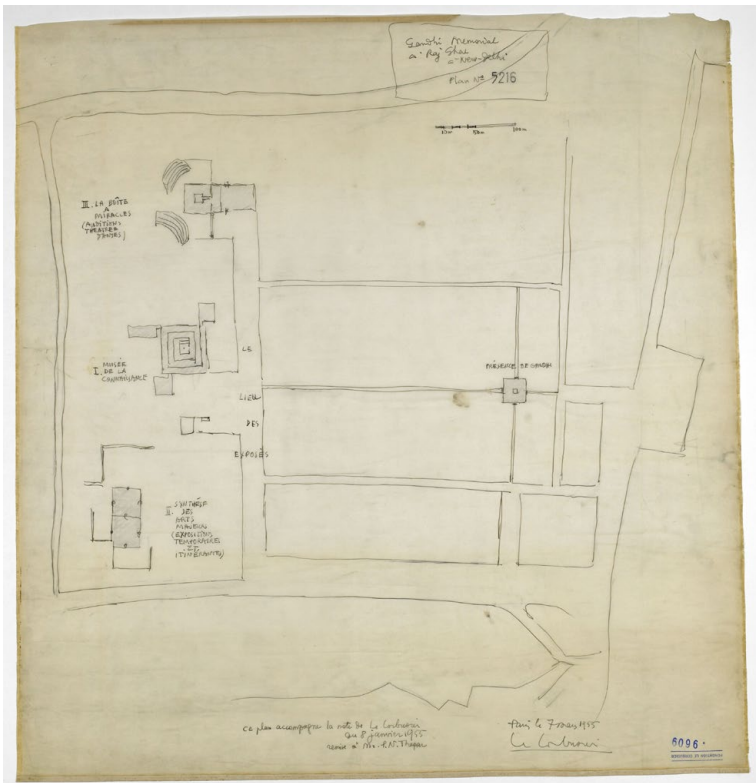
*The material presence of Gandhi is already expressed in the Raj Ghat Park by a quadrangular prism of grey concrete set on a socle a few steps high over four square plots of lawn which surround it. The pilgrims lay flowers on this prism according to an Indian custom and this custom is extraordinarily full of dignity and beauty. [...] This act of devotion is perfect. One could not find a better one.*

*However, it has managed to be spoilt by the sacrilegious intervening of a horrible balustrade which surrounds the premises. This balustrade shows that those who have conceived it have no notion of what is sacred.*

*On the lawns which surround the quadrangular prism, men and women are seated in an attitude of peace quite spontaneous. All around is silence and covering this silence the immense vault of the admirable Indian sky with all its luminosity. Against this background can however be perceived, through a large curtain of trees, the chimneys and the smokes of a large electric factory. This is not a bad setting. It is even an excellent presence<sup>4</sup>.*

**FIG. 3**  
A drawing of the Raj Ghat  
Le Corbusier's drawing of Raj  
Ghat for P. N. Thapar. The  
Samadhi is illustrated on the  
right side. FLC 06096.

**FIG. 4**  
The museum of  
Ahmedabad, floorplan of  
main building. FLC 06954A.



The observation in the last paragraph is of particular interest. At first glance, Le Corbusier's appreciation of the contrast between the smokestack silhouette and the dignified atmosphere of the *Samadhi* seems odd and it is highly questionable whether a majority of people would have supposed an electric factory to be an adequate background for a memorial of a man who famously rejected 'modern' western techniques of mass-production and industrialization<sup>5</sup>. However, Le Corbusier did not believe those two seemingly disparate elements, i.e. modern technique and spiritual sentiment, to be in conflict. The memorial which he had in mind was not supposed to become a temple of commemoration but rather a *homage* to the Nation's founder, a vital place in which the Mahatma's way of life and his teachings would be confronted with contemporary reality.

## Le Corbusier's plan of the Raj Ghat

Le Corbusier's ideas comprised two aspects: On the one hand, to manifest Gandhi's presence, and on the other to explain the Mahatma's teachings and to make them fruitful for the future. Thus, the memorial which he had in mind would not only serve as a conventional place of commemoration but also be a centre of education and thus dispose of a truly practical dimension:

*As a matter of principle:*

*A The Raj Ghat must sufficiently reflect the material presence of Gandhi to institute a permanent pilgrimage to his memory (it is this theme which seems to have been developed in the project of the Indian architects).*

*B The spirit of Gandhi, his activity, his work, his example, the pressure born by the contingency, the conjuncture, the fatality – must here find their explanation, their revelation, their analysis. It is the highest mark of respect and devotion that the Indian Nation can offer to its Liberator: to express the spirit of Gandhi's teachings, to maintain this spirit, to develop and put in into practice.*

*Therefore, two architectural events are facing each other: the material premises of Gandhi's presence and on the other hand, the material premises of Gandhi's teachings<sup>6</sup>.*

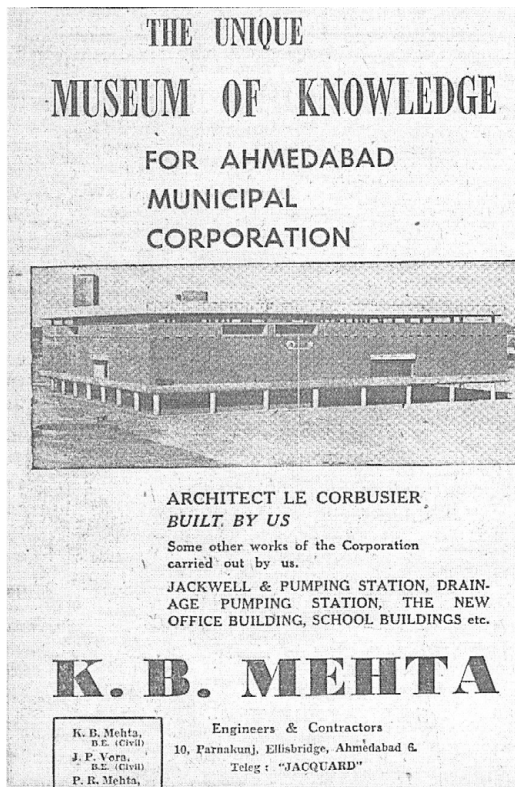
Shortly after his visit, Le Corbusier created a drawing of the Raj Ghat for P. N. Thapar (figure 3) which illustrates the dichotomous scheme of a memorial with representational and educational functions. In this remarkably precise sketch, Gandhi's *Samadhi* is shown in the same form in which it had happened to be ever since, i.e. as a square block situated on a quadrangular platform. Obviously, Le Corbusier decided to minimize alterations of the given design and limited himself to adjustments in dimension (the platform shown in figure 2 has a diameter of roughly 15 meters, the platform on Le Corbusier's plan at least 35 meters).

Le Corbusier's intention to minimize his own influence on the existing structures as much as possible is underlined by the fact that his own architectural inventions are exclusively located in the northern area of the Raj Ghat, connected to the *Samadhi* through a monumental axis of almost 400 meters in length. In this northern area, which is almost identical with the current situation of *Shakti Sthal* (*Samadhi* of Indira Gandhi), the architect introduced three architectural elements: A *Boîte à Miracles*, a pavilion for temporary exhibitions, and a museum. The museum itself is a *Museum of Unlimited Growth* and, as its three satellite buildings reveal, features a layout almost identical to the museum of Ahmedabad on which Le Corbusier had been working on at the same time (figure 4). The whole arrangement resembles the cultural centres which he had already proposed for the Porte Maillot (1949) and Ahmedabad (1951–1957), but in fact, it is here for the first time that Le Corbusier combined the three elements (i.e. *Boîte à Miracles*, pavilion, and museum) that should also appear in his centre studies for Tokyo (1958–1961), Chandigarh (1956–1965), and Erlenbach (1961–1962).

Le Corbusier's design for a cultural centre at Raj Ghat must be viewed as an exception among his several drafts of cultural centres for two reasons. Firstly, it seems to be his only cultural centre which does not stand for itself but constitutes an extension of a superior architectural environment. Secondly, its layout features an unmistakable hierarchy as soon as it is viewed within its given context, the most prominent part of the composition being, obviously, the museum. Located at the very end of the monumental north-south axis, it would have been the first building of the ensemble which visitors would have approached as they walk from the *Samadhi* to the cultural centre. It is perhaps no exaggeration to call this striking arrangement the most monumental situation of a museum in the work of the architect.

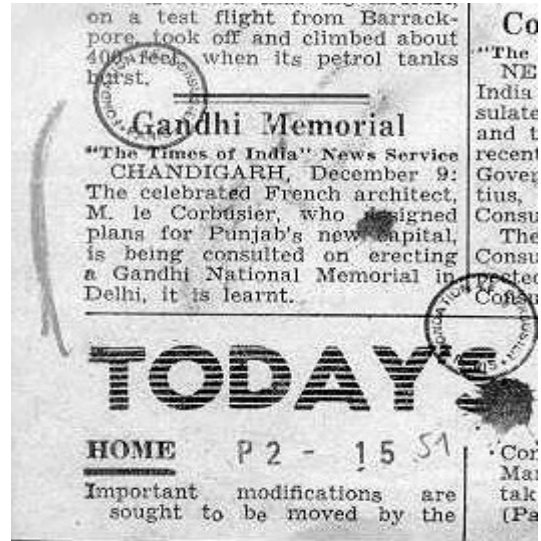
5. See Stanislaus von Moos, *The Politics of the Open Hand: Notes on Le Corbusier and Nehru at Chandigarh*, p. 416, in: Russell Walden, *The Open Hand. Essays on Le Corbusier*, Cambridge (Mass.) 1977, p. 412–449.

6. Le Corbusier, Note regarding the Gandhi Memorial, 8 January 1955. FLC P2-15-32-006.



**FIG. 5**  
Advertisement for the Museum of Knowledge of Ahmedabad in The Times of India, 17 April 1957.  
© Indian National Library Kolkata.

**FIG. 6**  
Announcement in The Times of India, 9 December 1954.  
FLC P2(15)51.



7. See Le Corbusier, *Musée de la Connaissance*, 30 Novembre 1949. To my knowledge, this paper contains Le Corbusier's earliest detailed account of the Museum of Knowledge.  
FLC P3(4)1.

8. It seems that the document had not been intended to be published at any time.

9. Le Corbusier, Note by M. Le Corbusier concerning the Museum of Knowledge, 13 December 1954. FLC P3(4)48. The metaphorical description of India as an "awakening country" is frequently found in Le Corbusier's writings, particularly in regard to Chandigarh, see William J. R. Curtis, *Le Corbusier's Capitol in Chandigarh – as a Cosmic and Political Landscape*, p. 116, in: *Architecture and Urbanism (Japan)*, No. 344, 1999, p. 116–128.

## Manifesting the Second Machine Age

An interesting detail in Le Corbusier's drawing is the fact that he made some annotations concerning the intended use of the architectural units. He assigned particular themes to the *Boîte à Miracles* (dance and theatre, i.e. the performative arts) and the pavilion (the *Synthèse des Arts*, i.e. the fine arts) but refrained from giving further indications of the museums envisaged topic, discipline, or alignment by simply calling it rather enigmatically *Musée de la Connaissance* (*Museum of Knowledge*). As this term is not self-explanatory, we now need to take a closer look at it.

Le Corbusier's first detailed account concerning a *Museum of Knowledge* dates back to 1949<sup>7</sup> but it is very probable that this idea already started to take shape as early as 1928 when he developed the *Musée Mondial* for Geneva. The first opportunity to realize such a museum, however, appeared as late as in 1951 when he began working on a museum for the city of Ahmedabad (figure 5). A document entitled *Note concerning the Museum of Knowledge*, which Le Corbusier wrote for members of the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation, contains the most detailed account of the objectives which he pursued in this project.<sup>8</sup> It starts with a striking analysis of the status quo of Indian society:

*India is awakening. She has escaped the disorders of the first century of the mechanism. Her huge population must adapt itself to entirely new conditions of work, living, relationship between individual and collective [...]. The second era of the mechanism opens today before all the unprecedented treasures promised by the technics and science. [...] It is therefore natural and urgent that the present societies (town, province, or State), each at a different level, should be able to realize the tasks they must effect and, by inexorable necessity, should be able to understand what they have been in the past, what they are, what they will be in future<sup>9</sup>.*

Le Corbusier's introduction of the *Second Era of the Mechanism* (or *Second Machine Age*, as it may alternatively be called), in this context, is not surprising as it frequently appears in many of his writings, particularly during the last two decades of his life. However, despite its apparent frequency, the term is difficult to define. A both brief and precise definition has been given by Mardges Bacon when she characterized it as Le Corbusier's approach to overcome the first era of the mechanism (i.e. industrialization) through '*an infusion of humanism that synthesised the technical and the poetic, regional concerns, and social needs*'<sup>10</sup>. In any case it can be seen as a central element of Le Corbusier's private philosophy and thus as a part of a complex intellectual edifice, fuelled by his lifelong interest and extensive reading in philosophy, art, and science.

The precise nature of the *Second Machine Age* must not be an issue here but it is interesting to notice that Le Corbusier very often mentions it in connection with the museum of Ahmedabad and it seems very likely that it constituted the intellectual template upon which the concept of the *Museum of Knowledge* was conceived: '*This museum is not an art museum. It is a modern tool by means of which can be explained and visualized the problems put before the modern society*'<sup>11</sup>. Specifically designed exhibition techniques should explain selected aspects of life (such as climate, technique, politics, hygiene etc.) and thus help to understand the demands of a world that steadily grows in complexity: '*It will develop the reasons for international understanding. It will show the immense interconnection which unites all parts of the modern world*'<sup>12</sup>.

It is quite remarkable that Le Corbusier, different than one might expect, did not limit himself in Ahmedabad to the task of designing a museum building but that he went to huge efforts to ensure the realisation of his programmatic visions. One of his most interesting ideas was to initiate an international cooperation between the *Museum of Knowledge* and three major museums in Paris (the *Musée de l'Homme*, the *Musée des Arts et Traditions Populaires* and the *Palais de la Découverte*<sup>13</sup>), which should have resulted in a long-term exchange of museological techniques. In a letter to Prime Minister Nehru, the architect proposed to expand this cooperation and to involve the directors of the three Parisian museums, André Lévillé, Georges-Henri Rivière and Henri-Victor Vallois, in the creation of a *Museum of Knowledge* at Raj Ghat<sup>14</sup>.

However, although Le Corbusier clearly referred to Ahmedabad as a role model, several of the aspects which he mentioned in relation to Raj Ghat did not play vital roles in Gujarat. The museum of Ahmedabad was rather conventionally conceived as a multi-purpose museum with changing exhibitions. In comparison to that, his description of the museum at Raj Ghat sound much more advanced and visionary:

*And now begins the question of introducing in the Indian life Gandhi's spirit and his teachings. The only possible way is to make the premises in a useful, modest and efficient way [...] to enable them to offer the fine precepts of the leader of the Indian nation. It is here that Gandhi's life revives in full communion with all those who want to believe in something and realize something. [...] My observations are based on the studies I began in 1930 (therefore 25 years ago) and gradually perfected. These studies regard flexible constructions which are able to receive the most various demonstrations, that is to say authorize 'the explanation' in the subtle meanings of the term. It is quite a science, a new notion which makes use of the modern discoveries of statistics, photography, graphic documentation, sound waves, cinematography, etc., etc... It is the 'PREMISES FOR STATEMENTS': doctrines, theories, propositions, criticisms, rectifications, new propositions, etc., etc... In a word, it is as pathetic contact with life, its realities, its cruelties and also its miracles*<sup>15</sup>.

The ideas in this quote (such as the use of statistics, photography, and cinematography) already foreshadow another vision which Le Corbusier would pursue several years later in Chandigarh: The so-called Museum of Knowledge on the Capitol (1960–1965), a visionary 'briefing centre'<sup>16</sup> that would enable government officials, with the help of electronic calculating machines, to find answers for the urgent questions of contemporary society. It has been stated several times that this enigmatic project was influenced by the Philips Pavilion for the Brussels World Fair (1958). This might be true to a certain extent, but it seems that the pavilion was not the initial impulse. As the *Note regarding the Gandhi Memorial* proofs, Le Corbusier had similar ideas already several years earlier.

10. Mardges Bacon, *Le Corbusier in America: Travels in the Land of the Timid*, Cambridge 2001, p. 256.

11. Le Corbusier, Note by M. Le Corbusier concerning the Museum of Knowledge, 13 December 1954. FLC P3(4)48.

12. Le Corbusier, Note concerning the Museum of Knowledge, 13 December 1954. FLC P3(4)48-002. Throughout Le Corbusier's writings of the 1950s, the concept of the *Second Machine Age* frequently connects with the assumption that human society steadily grows in complexity. I have reflected upon this phenomenon in my PhD thesis and expressed the hypothesis that the idea of the *Second Machine Age* was influenced by Teilhard de Chardin's philosophy of Planetisation. F. Samuel had pointed out Le Corbusier's interest in Teilhard already in 1999 (see F. Samuel, Le Corbusier, Teilhard de Chardin and the 'Planetisation of Mankind', *Journal of Architecture* (RIBA), Vol. 4 Issue 2, 1999, p. 149-165). Her inspiring essay features a highly readable introduction into the world of Teilhard.

13. All three museums were relatively recently founded, progressive institutions with holistic approaches towards human culture and natural science. I have analysed the relationship between Le Corbusier and the directors, particularly Georges-Henri Rivière, in chapter 4 of my PhD thesis.

14. Letter by Le Corbusier to Jawaharlal Nehru, 14/03 1955. FLC P3(4)91.

15. Le Corbusier, Note of Gandhi Memorial, 8 January 1955. FLC P2(15)32-007.

16. Norma Evenson, *Chandigarh*, Berkeley & Los Angeles 1966, p. 85.



## The development of the project

Although Le Corbusier's function in the context of the Raj Ghat project was limited from the beginning to the task of an advisor or consultant, his involvement was not kept secret by officials and even happened to be announced in the daily issue of the Times of India (figure 6). The flattering interest of the Indian Government in his propositions seemed to convince him that the Gandhi Memorial could become another prominent commission. In January 1955, just one month after his visit of the site, he wrote an enthusiastic letter to P. N. Thapar:

*I am at your entire disposal to help in this concern which I have studied since so long. I feel that I can be of some use to your country just now when your problems are those which absorb all my attention since more than 30 years. [...] India must be aware of this: she can either take over the mediocrity of Western decline or on the contrary open the door of the second era of the machinist civilization which will bring the humanisation of contemporaneous activity<sup>17</sup>.*

However, despite a promising beginning, communication with Indian authorities was tedious. Neither Thapar nor any responsible member of the Government responded to Le Corbusier's proposals and failed to brief the waiting architect about subsequent actions. Also, a possible involvement of Le Corbusier in the creation of the memorial had never been formally approved or contracted. To Thapar he wrote: 'I will be in Chandigarh on the 19th of March for the opening ceremony of the High Court. [...] I hope that when I go through Delhi on my way back you will be able to give me more precise and objective news of my contribution to the Gandhi Memorial'<sup>18</sup>. Thapar did not reply and almost two months passed until Le Corbusier received a letter by a competent authority. The Minister of Works, Housing, and Supply, Swaran Singh, personally criticised the vague nature of Le Corbusier's outlines:

*Dear Mr. Corbusier,*

*You would recollect me having talked to you at Chandigarh some time back about the design for a Memorial to Gandhiji at Raj Ghat. Thereafter, Mr. Thapar and Mr. Raganathan had also further discussion with you about it when you were in Delhi last December 1954. As a result of these discussions you were good enough to send us a note indicating in a very general way your approach to what might appropriately be a Memorial to Gandhiji at Raj Ghat.*

*The note is very interesting but I am afraid it does not give sufficient indication of the shape your ideas may crystalize into, in terms of a concrete design. I am not sure if you would be interested in preparing a design, with necessary drawing sufficient enough in detail to illustrate the project, in the absence of any guaranteed remuneration or without being finally commissioned. Of course, if the design prepared by you is finally accepted, you would be paid the fees you might reasonably expect at a specified percentage of the actual construction cost of the project. We have in fact thrown open an invitation to architects in India on this base. I enclose a copy of the press note that has been issued on this behalf.*

*In case it would be worth your while to work further on the design for a memorial at Raj Ghat on these terms, you may please let us know about it. I shall be glad to arrange to let you have any information that you may require about the topographical survey of the area etc.*

*Yours sincerely, Swaran Singh<sup>19</sup>.*

The Minister's news annoyed Le Corbusier. He answered quickly and clarified that he would not be willing to submit further ideas for a memorial as long as no remuneration could be guaranteed by the Government:

*Dear Sir*

*I am in due receipt of your letter dated May 25, 1955 proposing that I should submit drawings sufficient in detail to illustrate my note regarding the Gandhi Memorial. You also enclosed a press note informing that the Government of India is inviting all the architects to cooperate and submit their designs for consideration.*

*I am engaged in most important works which do not permit me to establish without remuneration the drawings which you ask for in your letter. I take leave to say that in behalf of India I lose each day a considerable amount of money and this because your Country is not yet accustomed to the activities of an architect and because no remuneration is offered or so low a one that the architect cannot perform his talk*

17. Letter by Le Corbusier to P. N. Thapar, 14 January 1955. FLC P2(15)39-002.

18. Letter by Le Corbusier to P. N. Thapar, 11 March 1955. FLC P2(15)44-002.

19. Letter by Swaran Singh, Minister for Works, Housing & Supply, 25 May 1955. FLC P2(15)46.

*well and thoroughly. I draw your attention to this situation which is a serious one. Of course I have done my work in Chandigarh and Ahmedabad with all the customary professional thoroughness to which I owe my reputation. I consider that to express the ideas of the Gandhi Memorial would require a vast knowledge in different domains and would involve considerable work which would lead to proportionate expenses.*

*I have done my utmost for you in this concern.*

*With my best regards, yours sincerely  
LE CORBUSIER<sup>20</sup>*

This letter marked the end of Le Corbusier's involvement in the project and no further correspondence concerning this subject can be found. Although the dialogue between him and the Indian authorities finally resulted in an apparently unsatisfactory dissent, it is nevertheless difficult to blame either of the two parties. The Indian Governments wish to set up a public contest is as much understandable as Le Corbusier's unwillingness to submit further detailed propositions without a guaranteed contract or remuneration. The remaining impression is that of a unique but missed opportunity and the contemporary reader of those correspondences is nowadays inclined to wonder what the Raj Ghat could have had become if more mutual understanding had been available.

The current memorial by Vanu Bhuta (figures 7 and 8) is universally recognized as a masterpiece. Like Le Corbusier, Bhuta decided to stick to the already existing layout as much as possible and primarily monumentalized its dimensions. He slightly altered the design of the first Samadhi by substituting the concrete block with a dark stone prism that bears Gandhi's legendary last words ( **हे राम**, i.e. 'hey ram') on the front side. In total, Bhuta's composition evokes an atmosphere of both dignity and sobriety. Albeit unmistakably monumental in scale, it refrains from being pathetic or pretentious.

However, despite its prominence, many aspects of Bhuta's memorial remain obscure. Other than one might expect, the monument has been scarcely mentioned in publications and no detailed account of its history seems to exist at this point. It was not even possible for me to clarify the precise dates of its erection. Jon Lang states that works on the memorial were finished around 1956 but this seems to be unprecise.<sup>21</sup> In fact, images of the Raj Ghat which were taken on festive occasions between 1956 and 1960 show the same situation which Le Corbusier had encountered in 1954. Very obviously, works on the memorial progressed much slower than expected by the Government. An author of the Times of India, H. L. Prasher, commented on this situation already two years after Le Corbusier's withdrawal from the project in September 1957:

*To think of it, nine years have sped since Gandhiji was assassinated. And yet we have failed to erect any memorial at Raj Ghat or install a single good statue of his in the Capital, our showpiece to the world. All the time we have been sitting tight on the numerous designs received for the memorial. Board after board, committee after committee have been going into the question. Finally, when the matter could no longer be kept pending, the designs were referred to a board of assessors who adjudged four of the designs for the award of prizes recommended the design prepared by the Bombay Architect, Mr Vhanu Bhuta, as the best. A Cabinet sub-committee, including Pandit Pant and Mr. Morarji Desai, met and accepted it. And yet the issue is to receive still further consideration – for how long one does not know.*

*But all this is a story of inexcusable delay and procrastination. What is there to deliberate and debate for so long? Surely, it could not have been due to any shortage of money in this period. We have built Vigyan Bhavan; we have built Ashoka Hotel. And we have built a whole city of Chandigarh.*

*It has been said that the decision could not be arrived at because opinion was divided in the High Command over the issue. For example, it was held that Gandhiji would not have wished anything on a grand scale. But this is neither here nor there. Gandhiji would have wished many things around us otherwise than they are. [...] There are even people who say that the best memorial to Gandhiji is to act on his teachings and cherish him in our hearts. This sounds sensible. But, pray, if Gandhiji is best enshrined in our hearts, then there is the end of the matter. Why have the present Samadhi even? [...]*

*In this connection, lots of words have been bandied about simplicity. People who have no idea of the nature of a memorial are talking that the structure should be in conformity with Gandhiji's teachings of simplicity. But these delightful persons forget that a memorial, by the sheer force of its inner necessity and integrity, has to be a monumental work of art. It must reflect the spirit of great architecture by its form, volume and*

20. Letter by Le Corbusier to Swaran Singh, Minister for Works, Housing & Supply, 31 May 1955. FLC P2(15)48-003.

21. See Jon Lang, *A Concise History of Modern Architecture in India*, Ranikhet 2016, p. 55.



**FIG. 7**  
Aerial view of Raj Ghat as it appears today.  
© GoogleEarth.



**FIG. 8**  
Vanu Bhuta's design of the Samadhi. © Author's archive.

*spatial position. To talk of simplicity in this context is to betray simplicity itself. The primary thing about a memorial is that it should be artistic – and not that it should be Indian or that it should be simple.*

*How can a memorial be monumental if it is not elaborate and on a grand scale? Recall to mind the world's great memorials built in recent times. Can you think of any which is as simple as Stonehenge? No doubt that Gandhiji was an apostle of austerity and simplicity. But it will be conceded that Lord Buddha even went further – he told us that life was all pain and that as desire was the root of all trouble, we should cut down desires to the minimum. And yet in his memory have been erected gigantic stupas, golden pagodas and colossal statues.*

*It has to be realised that public monuments are huge affairs and are undertaken now and then. They are not like Government hutments – they are supposed to last for hundreds of years and are built for the generations to come<sup>22</sup>.*

It is interesting to note that the author of this article, although he referred to Chandigarh, did not mention Le Corbusier's name in connection with the memorial. Whether he knew about the French architect's short episode in Delhi, must remain unclear. In any case, the article demonstrates how sensitive the Raj Ghat's issue truly had been.

It was the purpose of this paper to outline Le Corbusier's involvement in the genesis of the Raj Ghat in a general way. However, several important questions remain unanswered: Who were the authors of the three drawings which Le Corbusier received in 1953? Which submissions did finally reach the Ministry of Works, Housing & Supply in 1955? One question is particularly delicate: Did Bhuta know Le Corbusier's sketch and did he take inspiration from it? The strong similarities between Bhuta's layout and Le Corbusier's sketch are indeed apparent at first glance and cannot be neglected (compare Figs. 3 & 7). Solving those questions is very certainly only possible by examining remaining documents which must be housed in the archives of the Central Public Works Department in New Delhi. One can only hope that Indian authorities will grant researchers the opportunity to analyse relevant material and thus help to reconstruct the history of one of India's most important post-independence architectures.

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#### Author

**Robert Maximilian Woitschütze** (\*1988) obtained a PhD in History of Art from the University of Bonn. He is currently a postdoctoral research fellow at the National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo.

22. H. L. Prasher, The Rajghat Memorial, in: *The Times of India*, 22 September 1957. Indian National Library Kolkata.