



The academic Le Corbusier community is bewildering for its capacity, complexity and endurance. As one of its card-carrying member, I have long assumed that with his critics, who at one time in the 1970s and 1980s were an community in themselves, interest in the ‘master’ would eventually die out, even amongst the converts. After all, what else might there be left to know and discover about the old man?

The recent publication of Le Corbusier’s Album Punjab does not disappoint. While Le Corbusier’s main series of sketchbooks have long been available in print, the Album Punjab’s publication by Lars Muller Publishers is a delight of its own. This is significantly because the Album is published as a facsimile. Lars Muller has done a fantastic job, right up to the caked dirt on the back cover and the one page note appended to the inside back-cover, that Le Corbusier added in 1963. Fully cognizant that it is not the real real thing, it only requires a slight suspension of disbelief to simulate the sense of authenticity.

It is difficult to describe the affect that generates from the sense of holding an ‘actual’ document. Indulging in similitude of the past, is of course central to the craft of a historian; but for me hold the Album Punjab was doubly uncanny feeling. I felt like I was proximate not only to Le Corbusier’s thinking mind, but also to time and circumstance of the making of Chandigarh, the city that my father helped design and build, and that I was born and brought up in. The Album Punjab felt like I was there, “as it happens”.

Which is where Casciato’s hard-work to carefully edit, introduce, annotate and illustrate the Album, along with Francesco Passanti’s transcription and translation, was crucial. Besides the facsimile, the Album has been published with an accompanying volume that is designed to aid the reader contextualize and decipher the Album. Casciato’s essays on Le Corbusier’s other relevant albums (E18, E19 and Nivola 1) helps round out the full set of unpublished journals that connect to Chandigarh. Her essay on Pierre Jeanneret as a photographer, that is supplemented with a Portfolio of his photographs that illustrate the site and the rural life that inhabited it before Chandigarh was made, adds to the sense of actually being there. Passanti’s transcriptions and translations are, of course, necessary not only for those who do not read French, but more so for deciphering Le Corbusier’s scribbles.

As I divid into the Album Punjab I was astonished by two things. First, was the unbelievably crisp design intuition with which Le Corbusier quickly sketched out his ideas. Where the Capitol was to be, what the relationship between the main buildings might be, and how the government center as the ‘head’ of the city was to relate to the rest of the city, were some of the large-scale spatial ideas that seem to have gestated more or less fully grown in his mind. It quickly became clear to me that decades of designing civic centers – none of which were built – had given Le Corbusier a firm grasp of how such institutions should function, and in Chandigarh his designing brain quickly moved to make decisions.

Contrasted with the crispness of the design ideas for the Capitol, is the flexibility and open-endedness of Le Corbusier’s thinking for how the city might be organized. Nowhere is there evidence of building any residential skyscrapers. No Unite-like structures can be found in the Album. Instead, we find in quick notes a Le Corbusier obsessed with the forms and organization of the rural life that was slated to be erased by the building of Chandigarh. Repeatedly we find Le Corbusier wondering why the organization system of the villages could not in some way be the basis of the new city. He even thinks of preserving the existing pathways and carefully studies how the houses work – including how they provide no privacy for sexual activities. At every turn he is in awe of the quality of life; and there is a sense in Le Corbusier’s musings that there could be much he could learn from these villages that could be applied in the design of the urban neighborhoods.

As we well know, ultimately Le Corbusier was restricted to the Capitol, and the organization of the residential sectors, though authored by him in principle, was detailed by Pierre and the very large Chandigarh Capitol Project Team. In this sense, the Album Punjab also stands witness to the city that might have been, the road not taken. Chandigarh today is one of India most prosperous cities, a coveted destination for the aspiring Punjabis. The Album Punjab suggests that the city today is not really the city as speculated by Le Corbusier in his first visit. As one for whom Chandigarh was his home ground, I cannot but wonder what my childhood might have been had that other city come to fruition. Just for that flight of fancy, I am deeply grateful to hold in my hand the exact facsimile of the Album Punjab.

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**Maristella Casciato**  
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