

# Jeanneret – the man behind Chandigarh chair and buildings that educate

## Making of CHANDIGARH

DR. SANGEETA BAGGA

CHANDIGARH WITH its elements, buildings, signage and elements resonates today the principles of simplicity, eye for detail and modest ingenious solutions that Pierre Jeanneret devised to complex problems.

"L'architecture Corbu à Chandigarh ne serait peut-être pas sans Pierre". (Without Pierre, Corbu's architecture in Chandigarh might never have been). There can't be a better tribute to Pierre Jeanneret, the Chief Architect of the Panjab Capital Project from 1951-1965, by none other than Le Corbusier himself. Having learnt precision from his father, a surgeon and having served in a biking company himself, the Swiss born Pierre was a simple, unpretentious humane



Pierre Jenneret at his office at Panjab University; and (right) PGIMER's construction began in 1960s commissioned by Pratap Singh Kairon and Jawahar Lal Nehru.

being who was also the first Principal of the Chandigarh College of Architecture.

Established in 1961, the CCA served as a laboratory to train architects who would carry forward the legacy of modern city planning not only in Chandigarh but new townships in the country. December 4, marks his 54th death anniversary, and the city with its

elements, buildings, signage and elements resonates today the principles of simplicity, eye for detail and modest ingenious solutions that Pierre Jeanneret devised to complex problems.

As an educator, he led by practice, using his mornings to develop the city fabric alongside the architect couple Jane Drew and Maxwell Fry assisted by a host of



Indian architects. In the late afternoons, he would engage in site work and decision making at the Panjab University for the Administration building, the library, and the Gandhi Bhawan which was closest to his heart. He spoke to the contractors, engineers and others through drawings, woodcut and metal models, which led to the development of a strong work ethic in the architecture department that is seen in the form of large-scale wall models of

the city in most public buildings, libraries, and institution foyers etc. even today.

As the Chief Architect, he oversaw the construction of housing, elementary and high schools, colleges, libraries, healthcare and markets for 15 years.

Pierre embraced the culture of undivided Punjab, the mother state of Chandigarh's citizens. Where work stopped and leisure began is difficult to ascertain, for Pierre spent his free time building

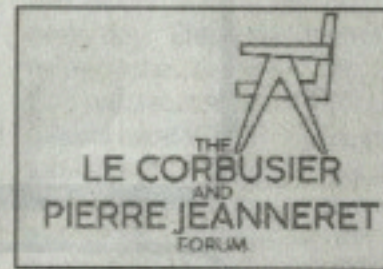
boats at the boat club, weaving durries, crafting utilitarian furniture, patio lights, hammocks and lampshades in his garden along with Bansi, his cook-cum-helper and close confidante. His weekend trips to Nangal, Talwara and the Bhakra dam site were as if to seek inspiration from the hinterland. And a close examination of the motifs in the city's architecture show that he took cues from these.

The Pierre Jeanneret archive housed at the Canadian Centre for Architecture also known as the CCA Montreal, Canada consists of a repository of over 700 drawings, photographs, personal letters, sketches donated by his niece Jacqueline Jeanneret from Geneva where Pierre returned in 1965 after leaving Chandigarh. This author was invited to review the archive as a native of Chandigarh and develop a critical essay on selections from the archive. While working at the CCA subterranean vaults on the Pierre archival documents, the amazing collection re-

vealed among other facts that Pierre possessed more than seven cameras at a time and alongside SD Sharma and Jit Malhotra, who were young apprentices working on the city, he would create the Camera Lucida—a series of frames to view the buildings from outside, inside and vice versa.

I was awestruck by Pierre's eye for detail, revealed in the subjects that he chose to photograph, be it the Gandhi Bhawan, or the Government Museum and Art Gallery. I came across 6-7 images of the same building or scene with slight variation in angles, light quality and distance of the clicks, and then the same from the interior viewing the outside. All of this were achieved through primitive, hand held and manually focussed black and white cameras that heightened the quality of the photographs even more.

This showed how the 'inside to outside to inside' experience was important and contributed to the creation of Chandigarh's buildings.



His concern for the minutest detail is revealed by the innumerable models made for the Gandhi Bhawan—the jewel in the crown for Panjab University. The pin-wheel shaped tripartite structure is the only white pebble panel clad building rising from a water pool and contrasts against the red sandstone buildings around it.

The writer is the principal of Chandigarh College of Architecture. This article is part of the fortnightly series by faculty and students of the Chandigarh College of Architecture on 'The Making of Chandigarh' in collaboration with the Le Corbusier Pierre Jeanneret Forum.

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