

CITY BEAUTIFUL// CITY SPECTACULAR



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Although, at more than 14,000km apart, they quite literally could hardly be further apart, the Himalayan foothills of northern India and tropical highlands of central Brazil saw nearly contemporaneous transformations in the mid-20th century. Monumental efforts to consolidate states into powerful centralized governments drove the transformation of vast swaths of previously inhospitable wilderness into gleaming modernist metropolises. Separated by only an ocean and a decade, ex nihilo cities of Chandigarh and Brasilia supported the long-term state-building missions of their respective nations and granted their executives substantial credibility.

Why, then, are they spoken of in such different terms? Or in Chandigarh's case, hardly spoken of at all? To travel rags and casual architectural commentators, Brasilia is a "warning to urban dreamers", a "cautionary tale for utopian urbanists." It seems to be universally held up as an example of how not to build a city. Such charges drove once planner Lucio Costa to warn potential naysayers: "Don't bother visiting Brasilia if you've already formed an opinion and have preconceived ideas. Stay where you are. Let them say what they want, Brasilia is a miracle". The dialogue surrounding Chandigarh is much more muted. The city seems to blend into the global web of conurbations, its unique provenance an interesting aside to what is ultimately a normal city. Some dare to posit it as a potentially "perfect city", though it is represented with greater frequency as something more mundane-- the "hub of North India". In either case, the peculiarities eventually give way to a

description of a practical, well-governed city blessed with an unusually efficient traffic grid and surplus of lush vegetation. Brasilia's inability to escape the shadow of its built environment is indicative of the city's failure to cultivate a vibrant urban sphere. By designing a city that elevates concerns of modernistic transformation and monumentality above the interests of the citizen, Costa and Niemeyer designed an impractical city that makes impossible the street life that gives Brazilian cities their unique character. Specifically, Costa's choice of a strict two-axis arrangement for the city's thoroughfares and Niemeyer's preoccupations with reflective glazed sculptural concrete limits flow between the city's disparate sectors and creates a streetscape that is openly hostile to pedestrian experience. In contrast, Mayer and Le Corbusier developed a plan for Chandigarh that reflected the core modernist principles of traffic segregation and park-laden cellular development, while resisting much of the urge for monumental symbolism that permeated and ultimately consumed Brasilia. By logically arranging traffic systems and intelligently dividing the city into interacting sectors, Mayer and Le Corbusier successfully set the initial conditions for a great Indian city to emerge.

The divergent ideological motivations driving the development of Brasilia and Chandigarh are immediately apparent from their morphologies. Viewed from the air, Brasilia is said to resemble a bird, a plane, and a bow (**below**). Although Costa's exact reference is unclear, its character is not. The two-component layout, consisting of a 14km





residential axis exactly bisected by a 5km monumental axis, is an arrow shooting straight into the heart of Brazil's vast interior. The city was established to open up access to the country's fecund, resource-rich central regions, an obsession that had preoccupied Brazil's leaders since the country's inauguration (a new capital, distant from the country's coasts, was in fact a constitutional mandate). The highlands where Brasilia was constructed was true wilderness before the city's initiation-- a lake was constructed both to provide a reserve of drinking water and to mediate the region's unusual aridity and crushing heat. Brasilia's arrow established a vector for Brazil's growth, a symbol to empower economic expansion into a region that had previously proved impenetrable to the Brazilian machine. The symbol is striking, though it was conceived without thought of how it would foment favorable conditions for complex urban dynamics. Indeed, Costa was an old friend of the newly-elected president, Juscelino Kubitscheck, and his crude sketch (executed on a notecard) was chosen over the twenty-six formal entries to the country's formal design competition. Unlike those entrants, Costa was not responsible for designing thoughtful models and land use schedules, much less producing population charts and mechanical drawings.

Although the disjunct placement of the monumental axis and the residential axis greatly length-

ened the distance between home and work for most citizens, Costa provided tremendous multilane highways for automobile and bus traffic (to the great pleasure of the small subset of residents who were wealthy enough to afford personal vehicles). Hoping for the free flow of automobile traffic, Costa constructed fourteen-lane boulevards along the shorter monumental axis, complemented by several smaller arteries running perpendicular (**above**) Small side streets and cul-de-sacs were constructed along the residential axis, many years in advance of anticipated residential construction at these sites. Such practices ensured the aesthetic consistency of the city, even in the decades following its initial buildout. The residential buildings themselves are relatively uninteresting modernist apartment buildings, intended to integrate the middle and upper classes underneath a common roof. Some cafes and small businesses were allowed to organically infill these complexes. Workers who had been brought to the region to execute Kubitscheck's radically ambitious four-year construction plan were told that they were responsible for producing their own housing. Conflicts emerged as police evicted construction workers from their self-built temporary homes constructed near job sites, fearing they would become favelas. A more favorable solution was long unclear, as Costa did not intend for the poor to live in Brasil-ia. Rather, a plan eventually emerged for the lower

classes to live in visually distinct, poorly provisioned housing on the outskirts of the city, many kilometers from their workplaces.

As the region grew, Brasilia became tremendously congested. An underground metro system was constructed to connect the many satellite cities that had sprung up around the core area defined in the pilot plan. Already substantial bus services were vastly expanded, and the road systems were retrofitted with traffic lights to adapt the modernist cityscape to evolving modern needs. Today, the central bus station-- a hulking, multistory construction, overlaid by crossing highways and situated at the intersection of the two primary axes-- is Brasilia's closest facsimile of a conventional Brazilian streetscape (**below**). Out of all the areas outlined in the pilot plan, only here does there exist sufficient density that the air buzzes with human activity, as is characteristic of the coastal Brazilian megapolises. Only here do vendors line the walkways, their pleas for commerce competing with the conversations of tens of thousands of passing families and commuters. This structure, dominated by the poorer classes who must live outside of the exclusive complexes of the residential zone, represents all the chaos and confusion that Costa and Niemeyer hoped to stamp out in their push for a modern Brazil. However, widespread claims that Brasilia feels alien and isolating

suggest that perhaps this old-world commotion is a human condition that is to be fostered, not exterminated.

At first glance, the formal preoccupations that drove the macro-scale design of Chandigarh seem quite similar to those of Brasilia (Costa, after all, was a former student of Le Corbusier's). However, the national government of India was concerned with unification, not conquest. India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, hoped to construct a city to unite the population of East Punjab, which had recently been cleaved from West Punjab (and its capital, Lahore) during the 1947 partitioning of India. Nehru recruited American planner Albert Mayer to design a new capital for Indian Punjab, to be called Chandigarh. Mayer developed a superblock-based plan for the site, arranging homogeneous clusters heterogeneously around a grid (photo). The grid was gently curved with the natural topography of the site, and was designed to allow for efficient drainage. Two natural valleys running through the site were to act as continuous zones of communal greenspace. Le Corbusier assumed control (and full claim to credit) of the project after Mayer's partner suffered an untimely death, although the bulk of the planning work had been completed.

Both Mayer and Le Corbusier were preoccupied with the automobile, seeing it an essential com-





ponent for any modernisation efforts in India. However, the city's gridded design (**above: aerial view of Chandigarh, original plan overlaid**) meant that the city's generously sized avenues were still only four lanes across. Although the city is not dense, and buses are generally necessary to travel from one sector to another, the pedestrian experience is not hostile. The sidewalks are wide and lined with native banyan bushes, and the roads are desolate enough for walkers to comfortably meander. However, the city is compromised in some ways by the planner's modernist allegiances. It does not contain the multitudinous bazaars and malhalahs of its peer cities in India, and is regularly panned as being sterile. Other Indian cities boast more public spaces, if not the sort of wide-open public space that characterizes Chandigarh. It conceptually suffers from the same hubris that crippled other modernist megaprojects, like Missouri's Pruitt-Igoe. Chandigarh derives from an ideological lineage that holds that the built environment can, and should, impose a certain modernity into social order and into popular ways of thinking.

To be certain, Brasilia suffers from the same rigidity. When compared to Brasilia, most of Chandigarh's successes seem to be accidental. Indians never took to automobiles with the same enthusiasm as Brazilians, and India didn't have the technological capacity to construct a series of large towers as had been done in Brazil (Le Corbusier wanted them). There's a case to be made that Brasilia was the more faithful implementation of Le Corbusier's

Contemporary City. It is assembled of strictly homogeneous superblocks, linked by gigantic axes of traffic infrastructure. Its traffic is multilayered, especially in the center of the city, even though its top level is occupied with automobiles instead of aircraft. Unlike Chandigarh, the streets of Brasilia were constructed well in advance of housing infrastructure to ensure that narrow corridor-streets creating inward-facing "wells" would never be constructed. The residential axis, in particular, is a nearly complete realization of the "towers-in-the-park" ideal. Had Le Corbusier been able to construct the high-rises that he wanted in Chandigarh, would the city's public spaces maintain their same vibrancy? Would storefronts remain as rich and distinctly local in character? What if the city had been as overrun with automobiles as Le Corbusier has dreamed? Conditions in the city are already said to be degrading as more and more residents of Chandigarh can afford personal automobiles. Perhaps time will tell. But the restrictions on Le Corbusier's design seem to have left a void in the completion of the city that was filled by the people of Chandigarh. The plan wasn't complete-- unlike Brasilia, Chandigarh was a skeleton for locals to craft their own city around. Craft their own city they have-- the unique compromise between order and liveliness struck in Chandigarh is well-suited for the city's geriatric, bureaucratic populace. In contrast, Brasilia is a complete, compromised body, placed on life support almost as soon as it was completed. The array of unplanned satellite cities circumscribing the



pilot plan are the braces supporting Brasilia's artfully curved spine.

The subtleties between the two architect's dedication to monumentality can be elegantly teased apart through the careful comparison of Niemeyer's Ministerio de Justica (1959) and Le Corbusier's Palace of Assembly (1962). At first glance, the buildings are strikingly similar. They are both concrete quadrilateral bodies situated in the middle of a water fixture that is equal parts moat and reflecting pool. Both lie in the central governmental zone of their respective cities, part of a larger

arrangement of inventive governmental buildings arranged along a plaza. The Palace of Assembly derives its formal weight from its concrete roof, a colossal curved shell that weighs down the Palace's front face as if it were bearing the burden of the world on the shoulders of its columns (**above**). The roof was a trope of Le Corbusier's later-career work, and, much like the roof of his Ronchamp chapel, adds a sense of earthen eternity, as if the structure was an element of the world's own geologic scaffolding. Niemeyer eschews the sobriety of the Palace, injecting his Ministerio de Justica with

whimsical impossibility. The structure's front face is adorned with a sequence of floating waterfalls, each hosting a cascade of indeterminate origin (**below**). The crest of the concrete facade is defined by a series of large shark-fin cutouts, lending a dynamic directionality that greatly contrasts with the decidedly static Palace of Assembly. The extroversion of the Ministerio de Justica is rendered at a grand scale, projecting visual stimulus into the surrounding landscape (and seeming to flow with the traffic that thunders down the seven-lane highway only steps from its entrance). The Palace of Assembly hides its most fantastic secrets for approach, when such elements as its tremendous hand-painted doors come into focus. The 25sqft doors, airlifted from Le Corbusier's own Paris studios, are liberally adorned with vibrant depictions of cosmological phenomena and abstract ecologies, with scenes meant to invoke the proverbial "Tree of Knowledge" and Earth's original order(**next page**). Le Corbusier applied rich coats of decidedly non-architectural colors to the west-facing pedestrian entrance of the building (one column chartreuse, another lemon), rendering the massive structure strangely approachable (**+2 pages**). The recessed grid of the face's edge reads as a modernist interpretation of what form a human beehive might take, as if the interior of the building is a honeycomb providing the essential infrastructure for the legislators to keep the human colony of

Punjab buzzing. The building nourishes the endeavor of post-colonial democratic state-building both in practical and theoretical terms. The building itself seems to buzz-- it is difficult to find images of the Palace of Assembly's pedestrian face without a small, busy crowd of circulating people.

Niemeyer eschews pictorial representation in favor of delicate architectural play, taking advantage of low construction costs to craft fantastically labor-intensive and seemingly improbable concrete forms. His columns recede into fine-tipped tapers, his roofs appear to be floating, his walkways are cantilevered without visible supports. Although he was, by all accounts, technically capable, he fancied himself as an artistic visionary, content to sketch a few lines on a paper and hand them off to his draftspeople to transform into a building. His intense preoccupation with visual experience sometimes came at the clear detriment of holistic experience, especially for pedestrians passing by his structures. Whenever possible, Niemeyer preferred to glaze the already-reflective concrete exteriors of his buildings, blinding passerby with the intense sunlight of one of the world's brightest regions. During the height of summer, the midday Monumental Axis can become essentially unusable for pedestrians. None of his monumental structures were tuned particularly well to the unique environmental characteristics of the central Brazilian region. His glazed-concrete-and-







glass Cathedral of Brasilia is said to be particularly hostile (**below, also page 2**). Visitors enter the cathedral through a small, dark, tunnel which quickly descends below ground level. They exit into the cathedral's glassy dome, relieved from the tunnel's suffocating claustrophobia but newly crushed by the oven-like room's overwhelming warmth. The Cathedral is perhaps Niemeyer's most striking, magnificent work, but it is insufficiently cooled by the small reflecting pool circumscribing its hyperbolic roof. Some compare the experience to the descent into hell, a few going as far as to speculate on the ideological intentions of Niemeyer, a lifelong atheist.

Capital cities are unique centers for significant, symbolic architecture. They present a peculiar opportunity for architects and officials alike-- no-

where else is there so tremendous an intersection of financial capital and the potential for personal legacy-building. For the architect, earth affords no finer chance to play God than the planned city. It seems that Niemeyer and Le Corbusier (for it is their names to which these cities will be ascribed) approached these roles with distinct mindsets, if not levels of ambition. If Le Corbusier fancied himself a god, at least he was a benevolent one. Brasilia suffers from Niemeyer's conceit. Niemeyer's aesthetic preoccupations have deprived millions of Brazilians of the social connections that bring life fullness. It is beautiful, to be certain, but it ultimately privileges a beautiful experience for the few at the expense of the many.



"Industry has created its tools.
Business has modified its habits and customs.
Construction has found new means.
Architecture finds itself confronted with new laws."¹³



Throughout his extensive corpus, Le Corbusier repeatedly frames his understanding of modernist architecture as an industry in the service of utopian society. This characterization is the fundamental innovation of modernism and the International Style that defined its earliest architectural incarnations. He believed that an architecture derived from this principle would create a rational constructed environment, leading to novel peace and prosperity across civilization. Le Corbusier believed that his architecture would lead to the eradication of “violent military and political revolution”. Le Corbusier fancied his architecture as a sort of final architecture-- a complete solution to the ills that Le Corbusier thought to be universal. Such is the message of his Open Hand Monument, situated in Chandigarh's Capitol Complex and replicated across the world ([previous page](#)).

Chandigarh is the wealthiest city in India. It ranks highly in quality-of-life metrics, and recently topped a ranking of India's happiest cities. It is impossible to isolate the effect of Le Corbusier's architecture on Chandigarh's objective metrics. It is certainly likely that a planned city populated by career bureaucrats would enjoy a high quality of life and ample economic stability. Still, Chandigarh undoubtedly fulfills the sociopolitical goals Le Corbusier outlined throughout his career. It is an excellent city, one that quickly gained a distinctly Indian character and one that has proven to be a cherished home for millions of Indians in the decades since its construction. Most significantly, the pleasant character of the city is divided through among its citizens. Industry distinguishes itself from craft by delivering its gifts to the masses, after all.

Oscar Niemeyer's early work falls comfortably within the bounds of Corbusian modernism. His Gustavo Capanema Palace (1943), a governmental collaboration between Costa and Niemeyer, expanded the Corbusian blueprint to a larger scale, but replicated the piloti, recessed windows, and striking colors and contrasts characteristic of Le Corbusier's contemporaneous work. When later collaborating with his former teacher on New York's United Nations Headquarters, the two found themselves largely in agreement over their formal ideas, although Niemeyer preferred a more elegant, sinuous composition.

Niemeyer broke with the tendencies of International Style for Brasilia's monumental axis. His structures, no longer in the clear service of industrial

modernism, begin to take on a dubious intellectual vector. Many compare them to the compositions of Catalan surrealist Joan Miro, likening his serpentine forms to something imagined in a hallucinatory phantasm. His designs were impossibly expensive to construct, made possible only by the oversupply of inexpensive labor available in his era's Brazil. They could not be reproduced at scale, but they did not need to be. He was content with designing for the few. Niemeyer's designs seem incongruous with the distributed nature of a democratic capital, but begin to make sense when read in the context of an ambitious President desperate to project and maintain power for himself and his friends. Brasilia is ultimately a rejection of Le Corbusier's distributed utopian architecture, reducing the practice to the design of exquisite experiences for the powerful. Niemeyer's buildings are spectacular; they are unburdened celebrations of material and achievement.

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endnotes

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