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Questions of Authorship: Mayer’s Chandigarh Plan and the Work of Le Corbusier

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Abstract

While architectural historians acknowledge Le Corbusier as an author of the plan for Chandigarh, they also agree that his plan has its origins in Albert Mayer’s earlier plan for the city, adapting its garden city principles towards a rationally based design. Recent scholarship has taken this view further however, arguing that Mayer’s co-authorship of the Chandigarh plan be more strongly recognised. That same scholarship also questions the kinds of constructions made by architectural historians that mythologise figures like Le Corbusier, arguing that such narrow constructions of architectural authorship lead to an equivalent narrowing of discourse. Seeking to articulate debate around questions of architectural authorship and conceptualisation, this paper presents another argument regarding the relationship between the two plans for Chandigarh by proposing that the plans were in fact quite distinct and that Le Corbusier did not effectively make use of, or attempt to adapt, Mayer’s original plan. Using previously unpublished reflections of those architects who were witness to the plan’s definitive conceptualisation at Simla, India, in early 1951, the paper argues that as much as Le Corbusier’s sole authorship of Chandigarh might be considered a product of a certain myth-making discourse, it is also clearly identifiable in the actions of the architect himself, that is, in the personal politics through which the final design for Chandigarh was produced and authorised. The paper concludes with reflection on the manner in which constructions of architectural authorship are a means to an end in constructing particular conceptions of design and of history.

Co-authoring Chandigarh

The view that Le Corbusier’s February 1951 plan for Chandigarh was based upon Albert Mayer’s earlier 1949 master plan for the city predominates architectural
In Le Corbusier: Elements of a Synthesis Stanislaus von Moos states that the plan famously produced by Le Corbusier with the assistance of Pierre Jeanneret, Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew over four days at a hotel near the Chandigarh site ‘was not a new layout but a revised version of the existing – and accepted – master plan by Albert Mayer.’ He adds that ‘[a]ll the distinctive features of Mayer’s plan were adopted [in Le Corbusier’s plan].’ Later in a 1977 essay, von Moos goes further by suggesting that Le Corbusier’s modification of Mayer’s plan is ‘very slight. This prompts him to question Le Corbusier’s claims of control over the final outcome where he writes: ‘The changes to Mayer’s concept hardly justify Le Corbusier’s implicit claims to be author of the plan.’ In his 1983 essay commissioned to accompany the Garland publication of Le Corbusier’s Drawing Archive, Manfredo Tafuri writes in concurrence:

> While he concentrated his efforts on the creation of the capitol complex, Le Corbusier attempted some modifications in the Chandigarh master plan. He geometricized the major streets, which, in the Mayer plan had exhibited a slightly curving grid…

Indeed, all the other essayists of the Garland publication series who write of Chandigarh express the view that Le Corbusier merely modified Mayer’s plan including Peter Serenyi, Charles Correa, and Norma Evenson.

Other respected commentators on the work of Le Corbusier write similarly. Kenneth Frampton comes to this commonly held view in his extended critical account of Le Corbusier published in 2001. While he credits Mayer’s neighbourhood concept as a major influence on Le Corbusier’s plan he also sees an early sketch design by the Polish-American architect Mathew Nowicki as instrumental to Le Corbusier’s work, further questioning the architect’s claims as singular author of the plan. Nowicki, who had been invited into the project team for Chandigarh by Mayer, was killed in a plane accident in 1950. This event precipitates the search for a new architect for the Chandigarh project that resulted in the commissioning of the second project team of Le Corbusier, his cousin Pierre Jeanneret, Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew.
In his 2002 book *Modern Architecture* Alan Colquhoun mounts a similar argument regarding the generation of Le Corbusier’s plan, seeing it as the ‘correction’ of Mayer’s scheme (again downplaying claims for Le Corbusier as generator of the plan). There he writes that, ‘[f]or the overall plan Le Corbusier merely regularised Mayer’s Garden City layout.’ While he is unequivocal regarding the status of Mayer’s plan for Le Corbusier’s final scheme he is not as charitable to Nowicki as Frampton. He counters the view that Nowicki’s work had any influence particularly regarding the position and layout of the capitol complex stating that, ‘for the Capitol he [Le Corbusier] started again from the beginning.’

In his 1986 publication, *Le Corbusier: Ideas and Forms*, William Curtis concurs that Mayer’s plan is the basis of Le Corbusier’s final scheme where he states:

> In principle, it [Le Corbusier’s plan] followed Mayer’s, as the contract suggested it should. But both Fry and Le Corbusier had found the curved roads flaccid, so Le Corbusier returned to an orthogonal grid while Fry sneaked in a few curved lateral roads for variety.

Recently, in his 2004 paper, ‘Contesting Visions: Hybridity, Liminality and Authorship of the Chandigarh Plan’, Nahil Perera has again put the argument that Mayer, and also Nowicki, be acknowledged as co-authors of Chandigarh’s plan. He claims that its making is best understood as ‘a hybrid of imaginations negotiated between multiple agencies, rather than the creation of a single author.’ Like those historians quoted above, one of the main issues in regard of the plan for Chandigarh comes to the question of its authorship. This issue has a particular resonance for Perera, an urban planner himself, who justifies his claim for the plan’s co-authorship partly on the basis that anointing Le Corbusier as sole-author is decidedly ‘architect-centric’. Yet contrary to his claim it is clear that the predominating view among architectural historians is also that Chandigarh’s plan is the result of co-authorship.

**Tracing History**

From where does this commonly held view of Le Corbusier’s co-authorship with Mayer of the Chandigarh plan arise? Those historians who do cite a source refer to the work of Norma Evenson, whose 1966 published study of Chandigarh is still the most authoritative account of the city and its evolution. Begun as a doctoral dissertation under the supervision of Vincent Scully at Yale University and completed in 1963, Evenson’s study was based on interviews and testimony of the individuals involved in
the design of the city including Albert Mayer, the British architects Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew, the Indian representatives who supervised the two project teams – P. L. Varma and P. N. Thapar – as well as Le Corbusier. In the context of keeping faith with the principal players consulted for her study, it is perhaps unsurprising that Evenson’s view of the lineage of Le Corbusier’s plan through that of Mayer is even-handed. There she writes: ‘[i]t would appear quite obvious from the essential similarities that the present scheme was based on the initial plan.’ She then adds, ‘In spite of the resemblances, however, there is justice in Le Corbusier’s claim that he had drawn his scheme primarily from ideas developed in his own work during the thirty years preceding the Chandigarh project.’ In effect, she respects the contribution of both by acknowledging a debt owed by Le Corbusier to Mayer while also playing up the strength of Le Corbusier’s own ideas brought to the project. In her later essay for the Garland publication series, Evenson’s view ends up closely mirroring that of the historians who themselves relied upon her work where she states:

While he concentrated his efforts on the creation of the capitol complex, Le Corbusier attempted some modifications in the Chandigarh master plan. He geometricized the major streets which, in the Mayer plan, had exhibited a slightly curving grid…. Though it would seem that the circle is closed by Evenson herself in confirming a clear relationship between the two plans and Le Corbusier’s debt to Mayer as co-author, this paper proposes an alternative view based on the 1984 testimony of Maxwell Fry written in an unpublished account of his time in India. Fry’s testimony, completed only three years before his death, is useful in raising questions around the issue of authorship in the case of the Chandigarh plan – an issue that historians place centrally in their scholarship of this famous twentieth-century urban design. Authorship seems a natural issue to raise in discussion of a figure like Le Corbusier who matches so perfectly what Naomi Stead has described as ‘the mythical stereotype of the architectural author.’ Of particular interest to this paper is the manner in which ‘proving’ or ‘ contesting’ the authorship of an architectural work is a means to an end in the construction of history.

**Authoring Architecture**

In their introduction to *Architecture and Authorship* Tim Anstey, Katja Grillner and Rolf Hughes observe how the concept of authorship has been ‘central to the development
and maintenance of the discipline of architecture." More particularly, the presumed link between the architect/author and his or her work becomes a critical construct in the writing of architectural history. For the architectural historian, the author construct allows one to imagine some part of the architect's self embedded in a work (representation or artefact) such that the work is 'owned' by that author and, at the same time, to imagine ideas transferring from author to work. As Anstey, Grillner and Hughes put it:

What remains distinctive in architecture culture is the tendency for almost any kind of discussion to precipitate authors, individuals with names who stand for an intention or set of intentions realised in buildings or articulated through visual media and publication."

Yet they also observe that the author-work relationship cannot be considered an entirely stable construct and that problems in establishing the relationship of author to work can evince broader issues, becoming 'a threat to the understanding of Architecture – work or discipline – as such.' However, in the case of the Chandigarh plan and its historical understanding, it would seem that the notion of 'contested authorship' works squarely in the discipline's favour rather than being a threat to it.

The construction of authorship assembled by architectural historians around the making of the Chandigarh plan pictures two principal authors – Mayer and Le Corbusier – the former who produces a plan that is modified by the other. In this case the contesting of authorship (the question of who might be attributed chief author of the plan) stands in for a contest of ideas – those of the American version of the garden city ideal pitted against a European classical rationalist 'return to history'. The underlying narrative is the triumph of history – that is, of the European classical tradition – a narrative that is ultimately reinforcing of the architectural discipline and its traditions.

Looking back to the commentary on the evolution of the Chandigarh plan this view is everywhere apparent. As Evenson points out, Mayer cites as influences upon his Chandigarh plan the deployment of garden city principles in the USA in the early twentieth century – the 1929 Radburn project and Greenbelt towns produced in the 1930s – evoking the so-called organic principles in urban planning now brought to India. In contrast Le Corbusier's simple gridded plan denotes the return to a prior historical tradition of urbanism. Evenson writes: '[t]he most striking difference between
the two plans is in the rectilinearity of Le Corbusier’s design, a characteristic not unexpected in view of his predilection for formal somewhat classical urbanity. Von Moos produces an identical narrative in 1977 where he writes:

Mayer’s plan is reminiscent of the organic patterns of the English garden cities and their American descendants (Mayer had played a considerable role in introducing Ebenezer Howard’s ideas to America). Le Corbusier’s modification brings the plan back to the tradition of Western pre-Howardian planning. His project evoked the grandiose urban geometries of L’Enfant’s Washington or Haussmann’s Paris.

Again, following Anstey, Grillner and Hughes it can be seen how historians use the concept of authorship for the purpose of linking individuals with ‘an intention or sets of intentions’ and for playing out a disciplinary history. A narrative is produced that Le Corbusier modifies or adapts Mayer’s plan for Chandigarh, connecting the physical drawing of a city with broader ideas and histories (the contest of twentieth-century approaches to urban design and planning). Yet the core supposition behind this simple narrative construction – the co-authorship of the Chandigarh plan – bears further investigation. The next part of the paper considers the making of Le Corbusier’s plan in terms of its micro-history and not in terms of the grand narrative history to which that plan is generally linked.

**Fry’s Testimony**

Much of the testimony concerning the making of the Chandigarh plan comes from Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew, the initial members of the second project team who contacted Le Corbusier directly on behalf of Indian officials, inviting him to participate in the work for the city. Both Fry and Drew, who witnessed the making of Le Corbusier’s plan in 1951, contributed various retellings of it in books and professional journals from the 1950s through the 1970s, Fry himself on at least five occasions. Yet Fry seems unsatisfied with this testimony and starts again to recount his time in India in a typed 40-page document compiled in 1983, three years before this death, but never published. What is most revealing in Fry’s final account is the manner in which it relates an entire sequence of events around the making of the Chandigarh plan in a relatively detailed way, piecing together actions previously understood only in isolation. In this regard it repeats elements of Fry’s previous testimony while also introducing new facts.
Before coming to those events in particular it is useful to know a little of the tone of Fry’s account. It is clear from the document that Fry writes from a strongly personal perspective that is different to that of his previously published statements. He writes not only as a means to re-explain events but also as a means to perform a reproachful self-examination. He begins in dramatic fashion by describing his time in India as ‘wasted’ and rues the opportunities for architectural practice that he missed in not staying in England. He goes further, regarding this loss as a direct reflection on his self-worth as an architect, where he writes:

Yet [I] acknowledge that I lack some of the ingredients of a big impressive architect, being always interested in so many other things besides; too dreamy, literally and basically unassertive, not anyone’s idea of a big London architect, no, not even my own idea of one.25

This self-depreciating assessment is not simply a strategy to elevate Le Corbusier by contrast. Fry’s assessment of the famous architect is also frank – offering something of a double portrait. On the one hand he admires Le Corbusier’s ‘genius’ and his perseverance yet on the other hand he describes him as ‘a man with more disciples than friends’.26 More candidly he recalls Le Corbusier’s ‘horrifying proposals’27 for Paris as part of the 1925 Plan Voisin with ‘skyscrapers that are only fit for a race of morons’.28 In terms of a psychological portrait Fry offers the following, describing Le Corbusier on their first encounter in India as ‘a closed façade, cold, distant and unresponsive … in the possession of a creative daemon that held him, as it were transfixed’.29 As far as the process of working with Le Corbusier went this document makes clear that Fry found the task both frustrating and demanding.

Through the early part of his account Fry describes the sequence of events from his first contact with the Indian officials Varma and Thapar in November 1950 to the making of Le Corbusier’s Chandigarh plan in February 1951. Fry’s testimony indicates that Le Corbusier did not accept Mayer’s Chandigarh plan or make reference to it in making his own plan. Of the initial meeting at Le Corbusier’s office in Paris Fry explains that the Indian official Thapar felt compelled to repeat the terms of the offer for Le Corbusier’s involvement (that he accept Mayer’s masterplan) because the architect’s response to those terms was only ever to speak in generalisations about ‘the magnificence of the task to which he would devote himself’.30 Le Corbusier’s lack
of regard for Mayer’s masterplan at the initial meeting is also confirmed by Jane Drew who later recalls that ‘Le Corbusier hardly glanced at it [Mayer’s plan].’\textsuperscript{31}

Fry also notes that when the second project team met at a hotel near Simla to commence ‘[t]here was no sign of Albert Mayer’s plan when the first day’s work started.’\textsuperscript{32} Fry also explains that he was the only member of the team to study Mayer’s plan in any detail, a task he undertook in the days before the arrival of Le Corbusier and his cousin.\textsuperscript{33}

Fry confirms that Le Corbusier conceived his own masterplan for Chandigarh the day before Mayer joined the second project team at the hotel where they worked. He also confirms that it was Le Corbusier who drew the plan himself with the rest of the team ‘gathered around.’\textsuperscript{34} In a previous statement Fry explains how Le Corbusier executes the plan using a technique developed by the architect through the CIAM meetings for the design of cities whereby critical landscape features and elements of infrastructure at the proposed site are mapped onto a blank sheet of paper prior to the placement of a regular grid that relates them all.\textsuperscript{35}

Fry explains how the following day, ‘Corbusier was sketching in the first outlines of the capitol group of buildings when he [Mayer] entered the rest house, hot flustered and angry.’\textsuperscript{36} After a short greeting Fry says ‘we sat around, on easy chairs in an uneasy silence waiting for the protagonists to come together, but nothing happened’.\textsuperscript{37} Here Fry relates the story previously told that Le Corbusier speaks to Mayer in French asking him if he knows the language and can comprehend the discussion. Mayer fails to admit to his poor command of French and is effectively cut out of the process. Fry sums up as follows:

The day saw the completion of all essentials spread over three or four large sheets of paper in black and coloured pencil as Le Corbusier explained it to Thapar with my grudging help, the critical decisions to which he, and by silent consent, all of us had come….\textsuperscript{38}

Fry then suggests a minor amendment to Le Corbusier’s plan as a reflection of Mayer’s previous plan, the application of a slight curve to one of the major roads in the grid, which Le Corbusier accepts. He also suggests that one sector should be planned by Mayer for the purpose of comparison with Le Corbusier’s sector plan (though Mayer
undertakes this work later his sector plan is not adopted). It is at this point that Mayer’s ‘defeat’, as Fry puts it, is complete. As a final act in endorsing Le Corbusier’s plan Fry convinces Mayer that he must sign Le Corbusier’s plan along with the rest of the team. By this act Mayer effectively silences his own work, and is seen to be do so by those peers who witness it.

Conclusion
According to Anstey, Grillner and Hughes the key to understanding how authorship is legitimised within a field is acknowledging the discursive operation of the ‘author-function.’ They observe how the different operations of the author-function between disciplines ‘reveal much about such disciplines, their legitimising institutions and the allegiances in their discourses.’ As described earlier the purpose served by the contested authorship of the Chandigarh plan (as far as architectural historians are concerned) is a more sweeping narrative of the contest of ideas – that of the garden city ideal pitched against the European classical tradition – the figure of Mayer standing for the former and figure of Le Corbusier standing for the later. From the designation of co-authorship of the Chandigarh plan flows a means of construing the process of design and its representations. Within that process the one-authored plan undergoes transformation by incremental means into another kind of plan at the hand of another author. Here is a means of picturing how historical ideas are retained in the object or representation while other ideas are obliterated and replaced.

On the face of it Maxwell Fry’s testimony regarding the making of the Chandigarh plan does not accord with this construction of authorship or design process. What can be made of the Chandigarh plan and its origins as a result? Fry’s testimony does not of itself disprove the argument put by architectural historians about the Chandigarh plan but, by adding new facts, it does invite other readings of the ideas and events that led to its planning, particularly regarding Le Corbusier’s use of, and approach to, the garden city urban model.

Le Corbusier did not require Mayer’s Chandigarh plan to introduce him to garden city principles in town planning. Clearly he was familiar with the implied sources of Mayer’s design practice in English suburban planning, having studied Raymond Unwin’s proposals for Letchworth much earlier in his career. By the 1920s Le Corbusier had already distilled garden city principles in his practice but left aside its vernacular and picturesque organic forms. Indeed, in his treatise *Urbanisme* of 1924 Le Corbusier
discusses picturesque urban planning and organic form at length and yet he clearly
and specifically rejects the pure application of those ideas. According to Le
Corbusier’s lack of interest in Mayer’s Chandigarh plan and its forms, as reported by
Fry, is entirely consistent with the view that the architect had already given due
consideration to the merits of garden city planning and was not about to return to it as
a model. His preference was to his own development of urban design principles as
expressed through projects such as La Ville Radieuse. Le Corbusier’s take on garden
city principles, and his progress beyond them in terms of design practice, is evident
long before the making of the Chandigarh plan in 1951. Fry’s observations suggest
that he did not meaningfully re-engage those ideas at the time, a view that is contrary
to that proposed by many architectural historians. It might then be asked: Why were
those historians quoted above so keen to characterize Le Corbusier’s design as a key
moment in the contest between the garden city ideal and what is termed the European
classical tradition in urbanism? On one level this question is more revealing of
historical debates of the 1970s and 1980s rather than offering us a clear insight into
the design of the Chandigarh plan. Indeed it could be argued that a revisiting of the
differences and similarities between both architects’ plans might reveal new insights
that this shorthand historical debate had obscured.

On the question of authorship itself this paper has drawn attention to the way in which
the concept of authorship is doubly embedded in the discipline of architecture. Both in
the narrative constructions proffered by historians that identify architect-authors in
relation to the production of buildings or representations and also as constructions of
architects themselves, who act as agents in their self-production as authors. In
observing that distinction it has been shown how the question of authorship is not an
absolute but rather a means to an end in the construction of history.

Endnotes

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2 Von Moos, Le Corbusier, 217.
6 Kenneth Frampton, Le Corbusier (London: Thames and Hudson, 2001), 184-86.
8 Colquhoun, Modern Architecture, 214.
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14 Evenson, Chandigarh, 30.
16 Maxwell Fry, ‘India’ (RIBA Library), typed manuscript dated 1983.
21 Evenson, Chandigarh, 14.
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26 Fry, ‘India’, 5.
29 Fry, ‘India’, 17.
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