

High Court's Architectural Design

Le Corbusier once described the complex of which the high court formed a part as "a great architectural venture using very poor materials and a labor force quite unused to modern building techniques, with the tremendous obstacle of the sun and the necessity of satisfying Indian ideas and needs, rather than to impose Western ethics and aesthetics. The problem is accentuated by the ruling factor of the sun, under which a new Indian way of life must be created. The sun is so violent that until now the habits of siesta and laziness were inevitable, in native architectural conditions which allowed no work whatsoever at certain hours and seasons. The rainy season also has its problems."It was hoped that the buildings could be so designed as to permit the government to function throughout the year at Chandigarh, omitting the annual summer migration to the hills customary in former years. It would be important that the building furnish protection from the

sun and also the monsoon rains. An effort to shade the entire structure has resulted in the use of a double roof, the upper roof cantilevered out over the office block in the manner of a parasol shading the lower roof and also providing a trough from which monsoon rain water spills through heavy spouts at either end, falling sixty feet to channels connected with the reflecting pools. The space between the two roofs is left open to enable currents of air to move between the flat roof of the office block and the underside of the parasol roof which slopes toward the center in the form of a row of arches.

The program of the high court building specified provision for eight law courts and a high court, together with necessary office space. In plan the building took the form of an abbreviated L-shape with the long facade facing the capitol plaza to contain the courtrooms and the small rear extension to accommodate offices. Essentially, the building is a rectilinear frame within which interior functions are defined, the eight courtrooms identically expressed

on the main facade and separated from the larger high court by a monumental columned entrance rising the height of the building. Early sketches for the building show a multiplicity of arch forms on the facades, with the main courtroom floor raised above ground level on pilots and approached by a ramp. In the final version, however, the building rises directly from the earth, the main facade defined by a full-height concrete brise-soleil and the arch forms restricted to the underside of the parasol roof. The design modifications also appear to have involved space reductions, and the final plan eliminated a row of antechambers (sales de deliberation) behind the courtrooms, together with a number of small staircases communicating directly with upstairs offices. As Le Corbusier developed the design for the high court, it evolved toward an expression increasingly massive, plastic, and abstract. The perhaps excessive horizontality of earlier schemes was countered by an increase in vertical dimension, while what were originally narrow columns in the main

entrance hall became three massive flattened piers leading inward. It is the visual drama of these piers rising sixty feet from the ground to meet the heavy outward thrust of the roof which creates the focal emphasis of the present plan. What in early drawings was expressed as a lightly framed pavilion, horizontal in dimension, has become a vertically expanding space in which the void is defined and dramatized by strongly assertive sculptural elements. Within the simple and rather static outer frame, the building embodies a constantly active balance of tensions.

On the main facade the deep (4 ft. 7 in.), fixed concrete brise-soleil gives a strong and scale less pattern to the building, and only human beings and the unobtrusive courtroom doors can be used as visual keys for reading the dimensions of the surface. Commented the architect, "here the brise-soleils take the place of the weather-drips on a classical facade, but they cover not only the windows but the entire facade, and influence the whole structure."It is the concrete screen which gives the main facade its

overall unity, so that it is perceived not as an assemblage of floor levels and courtroom chambers, but as a single entity of plastically interwoven elements, in which the horizontal ground line, repeated in the two roof levels, is countered by the powerful upward thrust of the entrance piers and the pillars between the courtrooms, whose vertical line is echoed in the roof supports. Behind the brise-soleil, the windows of the courtrooms are of fixed glass, but between are narrow vertical spaces containing shutters which open and close on hinges, a ventilating device which Le Corbusier began developing for the Mediterranean coast. Once while visiting the high court with an acquaintance, the architect indicated the courtroom wall and said, "You see, it is all glass. But the sun will never be dangerous. He will not be the enemy but the friend-not the enemy but the friend."

It should perhaps be noted that the orientation of the high court is such that the main facade faces northwest, and thus does not receive direct sunlight

until late in the day, long after the hours during which court is normally in session. The light which enters the courtrooms during the morning and early afternoon is essentially reflected glare which is diffused by the sun breakers and also by curtains within the chambers. Even so, some judges have moved their benches to avoid facing the light. On the rear facade of the building, which houses most of the offices and has a south-eastern exposure, the brise-soleil is put to a severe functional test.

When the high court was first completed, the gunnite-coated entrance piers were painted white, producing a surface closely harmonizing with the concrete and reminding some visitors of the pristine clarity of Greek temple columns. Eventually, however, Le Corbusier became dissatisfied with the color of the entrance portico and after much consideration produced in 1958 a new scheme for painting the columns and portico walls in bright contrasting colors. The inside wall to the left of the piers was to be black, with the adjacent pillar painted green. The center pier

would be yellow, the right-hand pillar red, and the remaining portico wall primary blue. The execution of this design was delayed, partly because a latex-base paint would be required, and as this had not been included in the original cost of the building, funds had to be specially appropriated. Moreover, the project office may have been slow in executing the scheme because, except for Le Corbusier, no one felt very favorably about the change. Finally, in July, 1962, the job was completed.

The decision to paint such a large and important area of the high court was unquestionably a major one, for it has substantially altered the appearance of the building. Part of the difficulty in accepting the new version of the high court derives from the length of time during which people had become accustomed to the old appearance and had come to associate the white piers with the symbolic dignity of the building, for to some the alteration in the high court is as startling as if they were to behold the Parthenon restored to its original polychrome. Although the new

color scheme may seem a bit overpowering at close range, from a distance its vibrancy seems not inappropriate to the scale of the complex, and it has undeniably augmented the overall visual impact of the court. It must be remembered that in the composition of the capitol complex, the high court alone must balance one side of the grouping, opposing the great mass of the secretariat combined with the sculptural variety of the assembly. As the originally self-contained form of the assembly evolved a more assertive plasticity. Le Corbusier may have felt the need to give the relatively small and pristine high court an emphatic color scheme to enhance its visual weight across the monumental plaza. This is accomplished successfully, but at the cost of altering somewhat the monochromatic harmony which previously united all of the capital buildings.

Because the exposed concrete surfaces inside the courtrooms produced a problem in acoustics, it was found necessary to introduce a more sound-absorptive surface and the solution determined by Le

Corbusier was the creation of a series of large tapestries to cover the interior walls behind the judges' benches. The design of these tapestries was composed by Le Corbusier of independent elements based on the Modulor in such a manner that although the design were done in Paris, precise directions for their execution could be telegraphed to India. These directions specified the exact dimensions of the separate elements and included a color chart based on samples obtained in Chandigarh , together with a chart showing the final assembled pattern. The weaving was mean, to be done in villages and in prisons, preferably with one village undertaking to execute a whole tapestry. This was to prove impractical, however, and eventually the entire 650 meters of tapestry were executed in five months by a Kashmir firm.

Although the tapestries were reported to "have provoked the delighted acquiescence of Mr. Nehru and the Governor of Punjab as well as Chief Judge", it was perhaps inevitable that the designs, large in

scale and composed of unfamiliar abstract elements would arouse opposition from some of the judges who declared them "an outrage to the dignity of justice." One judge is said to have implored Thapar, "For God's sake, burn them or do something." Two or three of the tapestries were removed, and it appeared for a while that they might be eliminated altogether, but Le Corbusier, according to one of his colleagues, was able to appeal to "the highest authority", which was assumed to be Nehru, and subsequently, the High Court people showed much tolerance in accepting the tapestries."

Whatever criticisms may be made of the high court, there is no doubt about its visual impressiveness. Albert Mayer, visiting Chandigarh in 1958, wrote, "All this, the great hall, the great ramp, the huge columns, produce a noble and powerful effect, almost a primordial effect." In his opinion, however, the building did not work functionally, and its "effect are gained by padding the structure so to speak." To Mayer, the high court was "really a great

evocative work of sculpture, not in fact architecture."

Although it seems hardly reasonable to deny the work of Le Corbusier the title of architecture, there is no question that its primary effectiveness lies in its poetic, sculptural aspects. Recalling 'United' Habitation. Maxwell Fry once said, "It was the miracle of Marseilles to find how the building, standing there among its trees, sung like a humming top, monumental but vibrating. And so again will be his high court at Chandigarh a monument of the plain, vibrating in the Indian sunlight, organic because it is a living organ of thought and emotion, but fixed there crystalline, crystal clear, in an idea of life established until ruin finally overtakes it as ruin will overtake the very hills against which it now stands silhouetted."