CHANDIGARH: ONCE THE FUTURE CITY

After years of struggle in Rio, Algiers, Saint-Dié and Bogotá, Le Corbusier, at the age of 62, had the rare opportunity to apply his theories to the design of a new city. Chandigarh was to be his most momentous assignment: the only urban plan of substance he implemented. Yet, after planning the city's outlines in a matter of weeks, he delegated the design of the fabric to others and concentrated on the group of buildings on the Capitol. He saw the Capitol as a sacred place to match the Acropolis. Separate from the rest of the city, it became almost a prohibited zone to most of the citizens whom he expected to stand back, in awe of his architecture. Separated by vast distances, the Capitol buildings became individual oases, each with its own intricate box of tricks, of which Le Corbusier was the master. Jim Antoniou discusses the city's present condition.

Beginnings
In 1947, when India gained its independence, the western part of the Punjab, with its provincial capital Lahore, was turned over to Pakistan. The eastern Punjab, in India, became a state without a capital. The immediate task was to provide shelter to those displaced from west Punjab within a new permanent capital. Yet, the idea of relocating the functions of a new capital in an existing town on a permanent basis was rejected.

A year later, Pandit Nehru, India's first Prime Minister, decided to build the capital on a site 250km north of Delhi, chosen by P. L. Verna, appointed chief engineer for the Punjab and P. N. Thapar, director of public works. This was to be a modern city, free of existing traditions, for a people with a great ancient past, expressing India's faith in the future as a time of utmost transition. The new capital Chandigarh (the first new city in India since Jaipur in 1728) was conceived as a place of prestige and convenience, an administrative centre, with a clear goal and a target population.

When Chandigarh was contemplated, the focus of urban planning in India was unclear. In the 1950s and '60s, the idea of a modern city was vital, especially to a new independent country. Therefore, it was to serve as a model in city planning for India and even the world. With just 300 architects in the country at the time of independence, this was to be achieved by using the best expertise in the West.

The first masterplan for the new capital was assigned to American engineer and planner Albert Mayer, who was a friend of Clarence Stein of Radburn fame in New Jersey. He worked on the masterplan with his closest assistant, Matthew Nowicki, until the latter died in a plane crash in 1950. Mayer's plan consisted of a fan-shaped garden city, with a curved network of roads and varying super-block shapes. When Mayer resigned, the Indian authorities put together a new, European planning team. The two appointed architects, Verma and Thapar, decided on the renowned Swiss architect, Le Corbusier, whose name was suggested by the British architects Maxwell Fry and his wife Jane Drew. At first, Le Corbusier was not keen to take the assignment, but was persuaded by Verma. Le Corbusier's lofty visions and ideals were in harmony with Nehru's aspirations. Equally significant, Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew, now part of the new team, had acquired considerable experience in designing tropical buildings in Africa.

Le Corbusier, as general consultant to the new capital, was assigned to make modifications to the Mayer plan, or prepare a new masterplan. He naturally advocated the latter, insisting on starting afresh, resulting in a radical departure from the Mayer plan. Early in 1951, he prepared a new plan in a matter of weeks based on his own concept of sectors (although he did incorporate some of the features from the original plan).

Le Corbusier, who saw himself as the 'spiritual director' of the entire project, requested the assistance of his cousin Pierre Jeanneret (with whom he had argued frequently and had recently dissolved their practice). Jeanneret eventually agreed to live on site as his representative and chief architect. Le Corbusier could then visit India twice a year for a month or more. (He came to the site 22 times). Thus, Jeanneret, together with Fry and Drew, as senior architect working in India for a period of three years and assisted by a team of 20 idealistic young Indian architects, would detail the plan and Le Corbusier could concentrate on major buildings. All four of the protagonists were members of the Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM). The ideology of CIAM was to play a major role in the planning of the new city.