Chapter 10: Vision Plan- The Future of Chandigarh

All cities are embedded in their history. So is Chandigarh. Its embeddedness lies in:

a) the think big attitude which led to its realisation; and

b) its urban setting which promises its eternal contact with nature.

Just as the value of the pyramids of Gizeh would be lost if removed from the desert landscape, or the Inca settlements of Machhu Picchu irrecognisable without their mountain steps, or the city of Venice nondescript without its lagoons, or nearer home, temple towns like Madurai minus the streets and gopurams, or Varanasi without the ghats and the Ganges waterfront...could be placed anywhere and be without any identity. Likewise, Chandigarh’s setting is unequivocal to its value. Irrevocably, the seasonal rivulets, marking the eastern and western bounds of this modern town, its northern frontier the majestic green blue hills and its right angled grid appropriated upon a gently tilting plain, delineating the residential sectors, with another seasonal rivulet promising the city’s eternal contract with nature—the Leisure Valley, are the quintessential elements which must be conserved for the future generations of this city. Without these the city would still be the organism Corbusier envisioned, albeit without the soul. Hence a protective legislation to maintain these natural features and their areas of influence is a first measure to safeguard the future of Chandigarh.

The next most important aspect which should be addressed is the maintenance of the urban structure (the street network) i.e. the system of 7Vs which is unique to the city and the introvert self sufficient neighbourhood-The Secteur. The hierarchial road system is not a mere town planner's delight, but a carefully charted out speed and volume (of traffic) control measure that ensures pedestrian safety as well as a regulated traffic flow throughout the city. These two
components comprise the ‘Urbanism’ of Chandigarh, which distinguished it from its predecessors and made it a role model and pacesetter for future developments in the country. Thus no change (which alters the character) in the system of 7Vs and the sector can be permitted. The sector with its neighbourhood shopping and sociocultural infrastructure is a measure of the city’s quality of life (which has earned it the famed ‘favourite city’ tag). Therefore the specialised markets which are developing due to market forces or whatever reasons need to be curtailed. The special significance of the sector lies in the fact that it is self sufficient to daily needs and this aspect cannot be compromised at the hands of a goldsmith lobby or a traders association. Whatever we may do or say, the residential neighbourhoods are incomplete without the service sector; the barber, the cobbler, presswala, the cycle repair tuck shop and so on. These must be organised, encouraged and planned for within the sector/sub sector. An ideal location for these is alongside the existing Verka Milk booths, the E-Sampark centres, located within the north south appropriated open space in the sector. The added advantage of this location is that these activity generators will make the open spaces socially secure at all times of the day. In an informal manner this is already happening in the city, but its formalisation will ensure the availability of service infrastructure at the neighbourhood level, without the constant fear of the Estate office raids!

Following this, Chandigarh must be returned to its pedestrians. A pedestrian movement matrix superimposed on the existing grid of the city can help build the identifiable character Chandigarh lacks. These pedestrian predominant paths can help return the city to its people who love to walk. Not everyone has the time to walk in the city’s numerous gardens, rather people prefer to walk as part of doing their daily chores; grocery, or the Apni Mandis for vegetables, or to the barber shop...Pedestrian routes traversing sectors, along shaded
Modern Historic Centre of Chandigarh- Core Zones and Buffer Zone

The Core Zone 1 comprises the Capitol Park including the stretch from the Rajindra park in the Northwest up to the eastern boundary of the Sukhna Lake, along the north of the Uttar Marg. Core Zone 2 includes the Leisure Valley beginning from Sector 3 continuing through sectors 10, 16 up til sector 23, along with the buildings along the Jan Marg (sectors 9 and 17), the Cultural Complex Sector 10, The City Centre-17, and residential Sectors 22 and 23. The Buffer is entire phase-1 Chandigarh including Sectors 1-30 and commercial development along the South of Dakshin Marg. The eastern boundary is the Sukhna Choe, all the way northwards to include the Sukhna wetlands. This then follows the geographic boundary between Union Territory of Chandigarh and state of Punjab, an interstate agreement to preserve the view of the Shiwaliks and monitor developments by different state properties must be adopted. The Patiala Ki Rao forms the western boundary of the Buffer Zone of the nominated site.
streets, without the bothersome vehicular traffic is a must for this pedestrian haven. The only major conflict point is the V3—the sector dividing, fast traffic, two way artery. A pedestrian underpass or even a different pavement pattern (differentiate from the metalled road surface) at the crossover points (two each at equal intervals along the 800 m and 1200m sides of the sector) can help establish the intersector connectivity. At the intrasector level a change in the floorscape would suffice to slow down the vehicular traffic giving priority to the pedestrian crossing over.

The Heritage Areas of the city i.e. the Core Zone and the Buffer as already elaborated earlier in the thesis must be accorded legal status and thereby protection by the Chandigarh Administration. Immediate constitution of a Heritage Committee, notification of the Core and Buffer Zones, and enforcement mechanisms on the lines of ZPPAUP are necessary to maintain the integrity of this modernist utopia.

To elaborate further, Phase One (sectors 1-30) must be conserved in terms of their urban structure, grain, texture and the lowrise cubic morphology. To tackle density and housing stock issues, a uniform additional floor (which may be set backed) is allowed but the street picture be maintained.

The Madhya Marg and Jan Marg need to be designated as Special Streets, and the ongoing modifications to shopfronts must be prohibited as the very character of the modernist volumes is being lost in the competing column colour, finishes, textures and façade designs. These avenues were designed along with an architectural control for the buildings (along them) by Le Corbusier, which must be maintained as Chandigarh’s concrete (and brick) heritage.

The City Centre is another case in point. Painting columns and introducing all glass facades is not the solution to improve the buildings, the problem lies elsewhere. Restoration and repair of extensive exposed concrete in a scientific manner is urgently desired.
Secondly, the vacant plots in Sector 17 should be built to create more commercial space and to ease pressure on existing office space, or be resumed by the administration. This would also resolve the problems of completion of the urban composition too. The new constructions need not mimic the existing but at the same time, not be incongruous outcrops. The PTT tower continues to be a plan on the architect’s computer, due to this dilemma. Reconciliation between the old and the new needs to be addressed and in a think big way for this modernist utopia to sustain itself. Infact the PTT building is an opportunity and a challenge for designers to illustrate how sensitively the new is injected around and within the existing. The rebuilding of the KC cinema multiplex presently lying in deadlock also expresses a desire to usher in change—change for the better but with a respect for the past.

With parking and office space demands growing we need to think in terms of parking basements or even parking buildings so as to release space that is presently occupied by surface parking. One solution to sector 17 could be an entire underground parking level (under the entire sector) for long term parking and the surface parking could be reduced to 50% of its present area. Most important, surface parking should be heavily priced, to discourage private vehicles into the city centre (presently it is Rupees 5/- for short term; 8 hours).ETBs in the city centre would effectively discourage private vehicles. Infact with ETBs running around the inner loop road of the city centre, the rest of the piazzas (such as Neelam Cinema and others) could be made pedestrian, cycle and rickshaw friendly. The policy could be that once you arrive in a private vehicle in the City Centre, you park at a given basement point and traverse on foot, a freely available cycle, or commute by rickshaw, or even use the ETB loop, and for your way back home you again use your vehicle. This could help sort out the chaos, and improve the noise and air quality of the City Centre as well as the health of the exposed concrete buildings.

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Buildings are cultural symbols of the society, materials and technology, as also the time they are built in and therefore the difference in old and new construction must reflect. The present technology and new materials must be utilised to achieve the desired effects. It is ironical that we have still not been able to resolve and design a system of conduiting to take care of the mangle of electrical cables hanging in the shopfronts and verandahs!

Another intervention is to popularise cycles in the city, and provide tax relief to cyclists! We would see many a four wheel owner take to the street, on his bicycle, at the drop of the hint to this effect.

People/House owners who agree to maintain their dwellings in the modernist style be provided property tax relief/technical assistance on carrying about conservation and repairs. As a tourist potential, ‘heritage homes’ label be given to the residences, and also marked on the heritage tours maps of the Chandigarh Tourism Department website. Places of tourist interest must have a visitor fee, the funds of which are pumped into site maintenance of tourist spots.

New developments beyond phase 1 must have freedom of expression in terms of choice of colour, material, textures, exterior and interior layouts and not be governed by (existing) blanket byelaws. Contrast and variety are needed to fulfill physical needs and aesthetic aspirations of a modern society and Chandigarh must look forward to change in order to continue to be an expression of the future.

A mass rapid tube that links Chandigarh to as far as Baddi in Himachal and Ropar, Kurali in Punjab, bringing daily commuters into Chandigarh will solve the surmounting problems of surface traffic and connectivity, whereby the pressure on housing stock will diminish on Chandigarh. This is very vital to curb the mushrooming housing societies in the city’s periphery.

Last, but not the least, a think big attitude and vision requires that Chandigarh be situated politically correct. The original idea of a new
capital unfettered by the traditions of the past, needs to be reunderstood against the city’s present status. Burdened, more than, enjoying the status of being the capital of two states and a UT, Chandigarh has its feet presently in three boats! Most of the problems of overuse, misuse and abuse of building stock as well as urban infrastructure, especially within the heritage zones are credited to multiple custodianship. A beginning has to be made and rightfully so. Chandigarh must statutorily be awarded the status of a Union Territory alone. As an independent entity— the Union Territory of Chandigarh as a harbinger of change, should chart its course independently, while cherishing its modernist past as a legacy for future. This political status is a sure way to put subsequent legislative mechanisms in place, a management plan in action, and fulfill the responsibility befitting a Unesco World Heritage Site.