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## Tom Avermaete and Maristella Casciato, *Casablanca Chandigarh. A Report on Modernization, with Photographic Missions* by Yto Barrada and Takashi Homma

Montreal: Canadian Center for Architecture; Zürich: Park Books, 2014

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### Référence(s) :

Tom Avermaete and Maristella Casciato, *Casablanca Chandigarh. A Report on Modernization, with Photographic Missions* by Ito Barrad and Takashi Homma, Montreal: Canadian Center for Architecture; Zürich: Park Books, 2014

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### *Texte intégral*

- 1 Since 1982, the Canadian Center for Architecture (CCA) in Montreal has been organizing architectural exhibitions, some explicitly drawing on and valorizing the immense collection of the institute, while others seek first and foremost to present an engagement with and positioning *vis-à-vis* issues and challenges of the contemporary (local) architectural discipline. Or as the official website of the institute states, the CCA-exhibition program “forges links between architectural thinking and practice, addressing contemporary issues via historical perspectives and an engagement with social, environmental, and political themes.”<sup>1</sup> Over the years, the institute has contributed to a reflection on both architectural history and practice with important and challenging exhibitions, some monographic in nature, we can think of *Paul Nelson* (1991) or *James Frazer Stirling* (2012), but

also ones which brought to the fore overlooked themes offering alternative perspectives from where to reread and rewrite the (recent) history of architecture. To name but a few: *The American Lawn: Surface of Everyday Life* (1998); *1973: Sorry, Out of Gas* (2007-2008); *Architecture in Uniform: Designing and Building for the Second World War* (2011); *Imperfect Health* (2011-2012).

- 2 The exhibition *How Architects, experts, politicians, international agencies, and citizens negotiate modern planning: Casablanca Chandigarh*, that ran between 26 November 2013 and 20 April 2014 and was accompanied by the book under review here, fits well into the latter curatorial line. At the origin of the book and exhibition-project lies the acquisition of the Pierre Jeanneret archive, a collection on which Maristella Casciato has worked since she was appointed a CCA Mellon Senior Fellow in 2010. Yet the goal of the project goes well beyond the presentation of a monographic portrait of Le Corbusier's part-time *associé* whose personality and oeuvre, despite some preliminary research,<sup>2</sup> still remains obscured by the strong shadow cast by the grand master. As Mirko Zardini, current Director of CCA, explains in the book's foreword, entitled "Cities after Planning," the choice of presenting together the two well-known cases of Chandigarh and Casablanca resulted from an ambition to develop a new narrative on these two seminal post-war architecture and urban planning endeavors along two lines: (1) taking into account "international political and technical assistance" in their genesis and, (2) assessing how their "original, modern blueprints" have been transformed over the course of time through "unforeseen modes of occupation and habitation".<sup>3</sup> The project's main authors, Tom Avermaete and Maristella Casciato, provide an echo to this broader ambition in the afterword of the book, in which they stress three points that, in their view, link the presented re-assessment of the genesis of both cities to current challenges regarding "contemporary thinking and practice in the world's developing cities".<sup>4</sup> The first two of these three points read as rather explicit critiques on much of the earlier scholarship on Chandigarh: (1) the essence of the modern city should be located in the everyday fabric rather than its exceptional places and monuments; (2) architecture and urban planning result from collective work, rather than being the work of masters. The third point, namely that "architectural and urban design projects should be conceived as issues of generosity and openness, instead of prescription and idealization" demonstrates the authors' interest in the quite considerable transformation of (the use of) the urban spaces and the built fabric of both cities. Instead of testifying to the failure of the initial designs, a critique that was common in late 1970s and 80s studies on modern cities constructed *ex nihilo* such as Chandigarh or Brasilia, this process, according to Avermaete and Casciato, in fact reveals the intelligence of the initial design which allowed, rather than blocked such radical reshaping by citizens. In the project, the latter point is presented almost exclusively via the two photographic portfolios that were specifically commissioned. Yto Barrada focuses on the transformations of the built fabric of Casablanca, while Takashi Homma visualizes everyday life in Chandigarh's urban landscape. Contemporary photography has often been instrumentalized in investigations of planners and architects fascinated by such forms of what, in the context of cities in the Global South is often referred to, somewhat indiscriminately, as "urban informality".<sup>5</sup> Evocative as they may be, the photographic portfolios of Barrada and Homma, however, do not do full justice to the "Cities after Planning" argument that runs through the project. One might in fact have expected a more explicit analysis of what Philippe Boudon, in his seminal early 1970s analysis of the transformation of Le Corbusier's Pessac neighborhood in France called the "règles du jeu" embedded in the initial architectural and urban design that enabled certain initial spatial qualities to endure, regardless of the radical transformations of form and use that took place

over time.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, there would be much to learn from Casablanca and Chandigarh if one developed a line of investigation similar to that applied to the PREVI-housing project in Lima, Peru.<sup>7</sup> But perhaps this will constitute a sequel of this project.

3 The main interest of the current project – and the book in particular – thus should be situated first and foremost in its attempt to provide a historiographical re-assessment of two of the most discussed and mediated experiments in modern urban planning of the post-war period. For those familiar with the earlier work of Avermaete and Casciato, parts of the book will sound familiar. Indeed, both have written previously on the topic.<sup>8</sup> But the bringing together of the two cases and their overall framing is new and forms a substantial addition to the earlier work. In this respect, the book is ingeniously crafted, presenting a three-part structure that not only creates a direct dialogue between the two main cases, but also seeks to embed them firmly in a broader narrative. Part one focuses on the geopolitical context of the 1950s. Introducing the reader to the main decolonization and Cold War debates in a manner that testifies to the authors' profound familiarity with the recent literature on these themes, it provides the stepping stone to discuss how the changing geopolitical situation in the early 1950s influenced the decision making processes that led to the commissioning of both urban planning projects. The third part brings to the fore the emergence of transnational expertise and practice in planning and architecture, in order to present Casablanca and Chandigarh as “the results of nuanced, dynamic processes of international exchange driven by the engagement and expertise of a new class of design professionals”.<sup>9</sup> The second and most substantial part of the book presents the two cases through a series of subthemes in order to confront the two stories and allow for a comparative perspective: After discussing, first, how the sites of the two future cities were “explored” and documented, and, second, how both designs were situated within and informed by the debates occurring within the milieu of CIAM and in particular its 9th conference which took place in Aix-en-Provence in 1953, a more detailed analysis is provided through three more subthemes: the overall planning approach, the design teams behind the project, and the specific built fabric conceived to turn the urban project into pleasing community-based environments.

4 This three part structure is complemented not only with the photographic portfolios that run throughout the book, but also with a series of biographical portraits. Under the heading “Actors”, some of the key players in the story of the two cities are introduced: apart from the inevitable two main protagonists, Michel Écochard for Casablanca and Le Corbusier for Chandigarh, and, in the case of Chandigarh of the predecessors Albert Mayer and Maciej (Matthew) Nowicki, we are also offered information on these masters' respective associates and collaborators such as Vladimir Bodiansky, Pierre Jeanneret, Edwin Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew. Interestingly, the latter two appear in the “Actors” section of part three, and are thus presented as transnational experts, rather than mere co-designers. For the Chandigarh case, the book also brings to the fore the important role of the Architects' Office which included Indian architects trained during the planning and building process, such as Mohinder Singh Randhawa. In parts one and three, portraits of more institutional players are included: architect Ernest Weissmann, who as head of the UN Centre for Housing, Building and Planning was instrumental in granting commissions; US ambassador in India Douglas Ensminger; UN expert Jacob Leslie Crane as well as some of the other emerging transnational experts like Mary Jacqueline Tyrwhitt, Constaninos A. Doxiadis or Otto H. Koenigsberger. This series of portraits, together with the fourth subtheme of part two, entitled ‘Governance’, serves as the most explicit evidence that Casablanca and Chandigarh are not the product of a single master's genius. This

argument is, of course, not entirely new.<sup>10</sup> Also some of the portraits are not as unfamiliar as the references and “further reading” section suggest. Indeed there has been some recent research that could have been mentioned.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, Avermaete and Casciato’s statement that we cannot understand these two urban experiments without taking into account the multitude of actors and designers involved in their genesis remains an important one for re-assessing the canonical historiography.

- 5 Despite the shared framework via which both cities are investigated, there nevertheless is a degree of artificiality in trying to construct coherent narratives for both cities along the same lines. While the authors go a long way to point out the similar dynamics and mechanisms underlying the genesis of the two urban experiments, less attention is given to what actually makes them different and why. Although the fact that Casablanca is the result of a planning process taking place as part of France’s late colonial policy, while Chandigarh is the product of a new nation state shaping its own image, does form part of the analysis, the two narratives at times diverge puzzlingly both in tone and perspective. One striking example is the discussion of the CIAM grids via which the Casablanca and Chandigarh projects were presented at the conference in Aix-en-Provence in 1953. While the former is discussed in detail to highlight the innovative urban reflection underlying Écochard’s planning approach, only a few lines are devoted to the – indeed rather conventional – presentation of the Chandigarh scheme. The book could have benefitted from a more explicit investigation of the reasons underlying such differences. In fact, it almost avoids addressing to what extent such divergences were due to the quite different profiles and personalities of the two main protagonists, Michel Écochard and Le Corbusier, with the former standing out as an urban planner and socially engaged technocrat, heavily investing in an open-ended infrastructure that can make and shape a city, and working in a collaborative manner with multidisciplinary teams; while the latter still regards architecture and planning as poetic and artistic practices at the core of which stands a notion of individual authorship. One also wonders to what extent this difference in narrative is linked to and triggered by the archival documents consulted. This question becomes all the more pertinent given the richness and variety of archival material brought together in the book, ranging from architects’ sketches and photographs to policy documents, newspaper clippings, etc. Especially given the institutional context of the CCA in which the project was presented, a more profound discussion of the benefits and pitfalls embedded in the effort of enlarging the scope of sources to rewrite the histories of such transnational planning experiments would have been welcome. In the end, the book might perhaps also be understood as a project that reflects two different strands of architectural historiography, linked to the personalities of the two main authors. While the narrative on Chandigarh stills reads as a history that puts the architect and designer at the center, the chapters on Casablanca testify to a clear attempt to go beyond an architect’s history in order to investigate and understand the various modes of production that make and shape the built environment. Bringing a welcome contribution to the rapidly growing scholarship on post-war architecture and planning in the Global South, this book thus also provides us with ample food for thought on the discipline of architectural historiography itself.

## Notes

1 URL: <http://www.cca.qc.ca/en/exhibitions>. Accessed 30 June 2014.

2 Already in the mid-1980s, the French architectural historian H el ene CAUQUIL wrote on the

topic, see a.o. her contribution “Pierre Jeanneret en Inde,” in Jean-Louis VÉRET (ed.), *Architectures en Inde*, Exhibition Catalogue (Paris, École nationale supérieure des beaux-arts, November 27, 1985-January 19, 1986), Paris: Electa Moniteur, 1985, p. 105–9; Hélène CAUQUIL, *Pierre Jeanneret, 1896-1967: un architecte dans son siècle*, [Paris]: Secrétariat à la recherche architecturale, [1986].

3 Mirko ZARDINI, “Cities after Planning,” in Tom Avermaete and Maristella Casciato, *Casablanca Chandigarh. A Report on Modernization*, with Photographic Missions by Ito Barrad and Takashi Homma, Montreal: Canadian Center for Architecture; Zürich: Park Books, 2014, p. 7–8.

4 “In Conclusion,” *Casablanca Chandigarh. A Report on Modernization*, *op. cit.*, p. 345.

5 One can think of here of books like *Informal City: Caracas case* (2005), or the series of studies on cities in the Global South produced by the ETH Basel Studio (see URL: <http://www.studio-basel.com>. Accessed 30 June 2014).

6 Philippe BOUDON and Henri LEFEBVRE, *Pessac de Le Corbusier. 1927-1967. Étude socio-architecturale*, Paris: Dunod, 1977 (Aspects de l'urbanisme).

7 Fernando GARCÍA-HUIDOBRO, Diego TORRES TORRITI and Nicolás TUGAS, *i El tiempo construye !: El Proyecto Experimental de Vivienda (PREVI) de Lima: genesis y desenlace / Time Builds! The Experimental Housing Project (PREVI), Lima: genesis and outcome*, Barcelona: Editorial Gustavo Gill, 2008.

8 See a.o. Tom AVERMAETE, “Framing the Afropolis: Michel Écochard and the African City for the Greatest Number,” *Oase*, no. 69, 2010, p. 77–100; Maristella Casciato’s contribution in *Chandigarh 1956: Le Corbusier, Pierre Jeanneret, Jane B. Drew, E. Maxwell Fry*, Zürich: Scheidegger & Spiess, 2010.

9 Tom AVERMAETE and Maristella CASCIATO, *Casablanca Chandigarh. A Report on Modernization*, *op. cit.* (note 8), text on back cover.

10 A crucial publication claiming the need to rewrite architectural and planning history from an engagement with a multitude of actors remains Joe NASR and Mercedes VOLAIT (eds.), *Urbanism. Imported or exported? Native aspirations and foreign plans*, Chichester; Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Academy, 2003, but one can also refer among others to the historiographical approach forwarded by those architectural historians working under the label Aggregate, see Aggregate. Timothy HYDE, *Governing by Design. Architecture, Economy and Politics in the Twentieth Century*, Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012 (Culture, politics, and the built environment).

11 Otto Koenigsberger’s work, for instance, has been investigated by Vandana Baweja and Rachel Lee. Important new research on Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew has been done in the last years by Iain Jackson, who also authored an article on a key project of Pierre Jeanneret in Chandigarh.

## **Pour citer cet article**

### *Référence électronique*

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