

# Form Follows Function

## Really ?

K.T. Ravindran\*

It is not often that one gets to see a film on architecture in India, When such a film bags two international awards in a row, one certainly has to sit up and take note. One at UNESCO festival for films on art, out of 35 entries from all over the world, as the best architectural film, and the other the Jury's Award at a festival in University of Alcala de Henares - Spain specially organized for films on architecture. Shifting through the store houses of India's contemporary architectural history, Manu Rewal has culled together his new film, *Le Corbusier in India* (his earlier films on New Delhi and on Mandu have also won awards) to reconstruct Le Corbusier's forays into the complex chemistry of Nehruvian India. The shared ideologies of a socialist, democratic polity is the platform from where the painter-poet-architect in Le Corbusier mediated the mystical presence of the mountains or the tender hardness of the goat's head that he is shown to caress in the film. The film covers an astonishing range of the canvas of Corbusier's netherworlds of ideation, concealing within its documentary-format narrative, the discomfort and birth pangs of the icons of modern India. Through skillfully edited black and white stills of Corbusier, interviews, carefully constructed sound tracks and an intimate yet invasive camera, Manu Rewal recounts the historic communion between Corbusier and his context.

To touch the pulse of the making of this film, I engaged the filmmaker in a two hour conversation. The extracts:

**K.T. Ravindran** *What prompted you to do this film?*

**Manu Rewal** I had done a 30 minute film on Chandigarh as part of a series on architecture, for Doordarshan. It led me to the discovery of Le Corbusier. This new film, which is much longer ( 90minutes or 2x 52 minutes) is more on Corbusier in India, it's not only on Chandigarh .

**K.T.** *How much time did you devote to research for this film?*

**M.R.** I had already done a lot of research for the first film. The next stage was during the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Chandigarh, when I interviewed many historians

and critics of architecture. also got lots of new books. Later I went to Paris and did a lot of research at the Le Corbusier Foundation. What one sees in the film is a very small part of what I have recorded and researched.

**K.T.** *During the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary festival in Chandigarh was the mood rather adulatory? Did that affect the way you approached the film?*

**M.R.** There were some people who were very strong critics who really ripped apart Corbusier. Charles Jenks was there and he was pretty forthright in his blanket condemnation of Corbusier. There were many people, who gave new opinions and interesting perspectives on it. Of course, you always have a core fan group which says everything is great.

**K.T.** *You were obviously not trying to make a neutral film, you were presenting a certain viewpoint?*

**M.R.** Of course.

**K.T.** *You made a selection of professional and critics for interviews. Only in the case of the Sarabhai House you actually interviewed the user. Particularly in the public buildings one would have thought it is more critical to interview the users.*

**M.R.** Actually I did a few interviews with the people from Chandigarh. But their answers were mirroring in many ways what the various experts were saying. So I thought let us keep it at that level. Anand Sarabhai had actual anecdotes to tell us about the relationship of Corbusier and his mother and these were very revealing about Corbusier. Le Corbusier has this awful reputation of being a dictator who decided everything and didn't allow for any changes. But in the film you can see that it was not always so.

**K.T.** *In fact I found your coverage of that house the most wholesome in the way there was an intimate relationship between your camera and the house. There were more layers of connectivity between your filming and the subject.*

**M.R.** In the case of Shodhan House I wasn't allowed to film inside so I got a top view showing the complete cube. The Secretariat! There was no question of even going near it, even pointing the camera towards it was not possible. I got one or two shots because I was on the roof of the Assembly building. But I covered the Assembly building quite in detail. Especially there's one track shot, which is from the main foyer going into the inner chamber, which was very satisfying for me.

**K.T.** *But a lot of that would depend on the way you had edited the film.*

**M.R.** Actually every step in the filmmaking process is very important because I do my films in a very intuitive way. I first have a script after doing the research but it keeps evolving. When I do the filming many new things come up. The moment

of the filming is very important. That's when one is actually in touch with the subject in a much more physical way.

**K.T.** *The tactile quality of the walls and surfaces that your camera was able to take in, could not have been done merely by research. The highlight of that was when your camera moves in the High Court to that embossed seal like thing on the wall. That is a kind of connection that Corbusier is making with the building on a completely different plane. You quoted in the film Corbusier's letter to his mother where he said here is the final poem unfolding.*

**M.R.** Nehru and the people he was talking to were initiating him into Indian culture and India art and he himself found resonance's in his own personal mythology with India. I think there was definitely a meeting somewhere.

**K.T.** *Would you say that your film is more about the relationship of the architect with the subject than about its functional role?*

**M.R.** Of course that was a major factor. I end the film on that the poem of The Right Angle, Which concludes:

“With an Open Hand I received  
With an Open Hand I give.”

But I tried to also show what didn't work from a purely practical way.

**K.T.** *If you were trying to do that you would have also tried to develop the horizontal context of that period. You didn't seem to have followed a chronological sequence in the way the buildings were realized in time.*

**M.R.** The idea was to go from first the city, then to the buildings. The structure of the film follows a mixture of chronology, size of the buildings and their importance in terms of the symbolic, anyway I didn't want to follow a very rigid structure... Let us take the High Court building. I got some interviews by Mr. Jeet Malhotra who was very interesting and narrated in nice way, and often-funny way where something didn't work and compromises were made etc. I tried to show that things were not perfect.

**K.T.** *Sometimes you have repeated some shots.*

**M.R.** I used some shots twice because it fitted well there, but I don't have a fetish of not using them twice. Is it wrong for a painter to use twice the same pattern?

**K.T.** *Corbusier's obsession with the tactile quality of walls and his use of colour on concrete, both come out well in your film.*

**M.R.** Mr. Doshi wrote this very nice article on Corbusier as the Acrobat and I think that's the kind of acrobacy he was doing. On the one hand you have very brutalistic, strong texture of the concrete and on the other hand you have his glazed and bright colored walls, He was able to achieve balance between form, color, the texture, etc.

**K.T.** *Corbusier also worked on the painting in his own buildings and they are the very significant part of his building, I would like you to speak about the paintings, the tapestry in the High Court both as an element as well as an instrument for bringing out the unease of the judicial system with the poetry in the structures.*

**M.R.** Yeah... that was good fun to do because Mr. Jeet Malhotra has given a nice explanation of the whole discomfort of the judges about the tapestry and the problems it caused. I took that portion in the interview and worked on it intuitively on the editing table you know. I used shots of small elements within the tapestry like the thunder to break down the interview into different sections. The first time Jeet Malhotra talks about a problem or a clash is followed by a shot of the thunder in the tapestry and as he says a line about the conflict, I show another form in the tapestry which acts as a kind of a punctuation mark.

**K.T.** *So you have interwoven the tapestry with Jeet Malhotra's words...*

**M.R.** Yeah.. I mean one tries to have fun at that level also with the film otherwise it can become purely educational and one of the aims was that the audience should have fun also while watching it. When you go through the door in the assembly you were supposed to feel a certain cosmic feeling even if you didn't know what exactly it meant. My aim was to convey Le Corbusier's ideas and try and convey his poetry while maintaining a certain distance by using some filmic device or the other.

**K.T.** *In my own reading these buildings are what they are because of the intensity of the poetry in them and not because they are the best functioning assembly building or the best high court or the best Mill Owner's building. So I am looking for consistency of that theme in the film...*

**M.R.** I have often in a slightly mischievous manner put the hard practical reality of a building in contrast with the high poetry and imagination of Corbusier.

**K.T.** *Your camera pans the hard concrete surface of the plaza, which is the most impractical thing Le Corbusier has done in a climate like that of Chandigarh.*

**M.R.** I shot in May specially for that reason because I wanted to see the place when it is the most impractical and I shot also in winter during the festivity of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Chandigarh. But what I found the most interesting was his vision, the grand vision and the poetry behind it which makes it more than just a functional thing...

**K.T.** *Le Corbusier came here to India to work because the opportunity was presented to him to work with the entire entity called the city.*

**M.R.** I am not sure of that... that's what I felt in my research. I spent a lot of time in Paris at the Le Corbusier Foundation where I had access to lots of books, lots of actual documents, lots of letters which he wrote etc. Was Corbusier more

interested in doing the city or was it the buildings of the Capitol ?... I am not sure which was more important to him. The first plan of Chandigarh that he inherited was simply made more systematic by him.

**K.T.** *He gave it a rationalized structure.*

**M.R.** He gave it more clarity. It is that transformation in the plan that I showed in the film. There are different opinions about Chandigarh. For instance take William Curtis. For him it is not possible to judge a city in such a short time. 50 years is nothing in the lifetime of the city, Chandigarh is like a new-born baby for a city.

**K.T.** *No , but for a DNA coded city like Chandigarh 50 years is a lot of time. I would like you to speak about Prof. Bruno Queysane, the French philosopher you interviewed in the film. He was floating above the immediate context and spoke of the transcendental qualities of the place. That was very interesting.*

**M.R.** Well first of all thought it was very interesting because he is not a professional architect but a philosopher of architecture. He is a university professor. He definitely had a different point of view than the architects. He had a kind of a mystic experience in Chandigarh. That's how he explains his whole experience. After the disorder, confusion, pollution of contemporary India, when he entered Chandigarh he started breathing again. Suddenly he was in an oasis of greenery and order. As he went to the Capitol, which is slightly higher than the city level, he was on this platform in the midst of the symbolic elements, the mountains, the various buildings which look like ancient monuments and the sky, he actually had an epiphany of a kind in that place.

**K.T.** *I think having him in your film also helps the film locate itself between the poetic part of Corbusier's work and its disjunction with the functional realities. There is a very big divide between the practical and the poetic and that ambiguous space is the actual space of the architect.*

**M.R.** That's what I was trying to put my finger on throughout the film. It was totally intuitive and at that level it is micro editing.

**K.T.** *I am seeing it from the way ideation is structured in your film and his interview within that structure is in a critical location. It marked a transition.*

**M.R.** He comes in when we are moving into the buildings of the Capitol Complex... In the case of some of the other interviews, though they seem to contradict one another they actually were completing each other. Each piece kind of adds up and in the end you get a more complex picture... A similar approach is followed at another level ; in the play between what the person interviewed is saying and the images which are shown. Sometimes the images illustrate or complement what is being said, sometimes they contradict or comment with humor if possible, on what is being said. So there is also this intent to create a distance between what is said by the experts and the audience.

*K.T. Your instrument to generate that distance is the visual image.*

**M.R.** Another distancing technique was the use of woman's voice for Le Corbusier. Even in the French version I had a woman.

*K.T. That was very refreshing to have a woman's voice for Le Corbusier.*

**M.R.** Ultimately, you know the audience should be allowed to make up their own mind. In a way I have to give them space to enter the film. Otherwise its propaganda. Also there are places where I have intentionally put no music, just sound and the noise of the place. In terms of the structure of the film, as the film progresses there's more and more of silence, and those areas of silence are increased as we go towards the end. The more time you have in front of empty space, the more you think. It is introduced very progressively so that you don't realize that it exists as a specific strategy.

*K.T. Why did you do that in a linear way.....*

**M.R.** To me a film is like music. Unlike a painting it is something which is a composition in time. It is linear. It has a beginning, a middle and an end.

I wanted to put across all the historical information in the beginning so that the audience can understand what Corbusier is all about. It is a pedagogic way and a very structured way, but once that information is communicated then one starts playing more with ideas, get deeper into the objects etc. The final impact is not just based on the direct overt statements made by the experts, but also in the subtle and subliminal messages that come out of the different levels of interplay.

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**Architecture + Design : March – April 2002**