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HERITAGE AT RISK

The expose of the missing Le Corbusier tapestries from the High Court reveals apathy towards heritage. Kiran Joshi weaves the story behind the artefacts.

The recent coverage in The Tribune on the plight of Le Corbusier's tapestries has shown that the situation of the 12 tapestries in Chandigarh is highly critical. The responsibility for their plight, however, cannot be attributed to any one event or individual but to a complex interplay of multiple factors over the past several years.

The foremost among these is a general lack of awareness and a resultant lack of appreciation, of the cultural value of modern heritage among various stakeholders – users and custodians alike. In addition are the factors of complete absence of an appropriate mechanism for legal protection and scientific conservation of these artifacts. Had all these enabling mechanisms been in place, it is unlikely that the tapestry in the custody of the Punjab Vidhan Sabha would have been lost to oblivion, or, that the ones in the Punjab and Haryana High Court mercilessly mutilated for inserting unsightly air-conditioning ducts.

The earliest tapestries to be designed for Chandigarh comprised a set of nine large pieces for the courtrooms of the new high court building. The one for the court of the Chief Justice (now Court 1) covered an area of 1300 sq. ft and the other eight (for Courts 2 – 9) measured about 600 sq. ft each. Though the tapestries were ostensibly created for acoustical purposes "a beautiful opportunity to place in accord the architect of the reinforced concrete (resonant) and the craftsman of wool (noise-absorbent)" — they would also serve "by the sweep of their polychromy and the intellectual and poetical presence of their symbols" as a "psycho-physiological stimulant".

The experiment with the tapestries was repeated in 1960 in the building for the Legislative Assembly using a similar design format but an extended repertory of symbols. A total of three pieces were installed here — two measuring approximately 1700 sq ft in the Council Chamber (now the Haryana Vidhan Sabha) and one of 1500 sq ft behind the ramp in the Deputies' entrance in the basement (now the entrance hall of the Punjab Vidhan Sabha).

A little known aspect of these early nine designs is the socially responsive method of execution originally conceived by Le Corbusier. Each of the tapestries was a structured composition of several rectangular units ("elements") with a standard width of 4'-7", corresponding to that of the loom. Execution of each tapestry would be awarded to a different village in the region and that of each constituent "element" to a separate family within the village, with a "manager" coordinating the entire production. Economic benefit from the enterprise would, thus, accrue not to any single commercial establishment but several households.



Detail of tapestry in Court 6: The 'counterbalance of complexities' and the 'tree as a symbol of perfection'. Air-conditioning ducts puncture the tapestry indiscriminately, mutilating motifs.

Courtesy: Chandigarh Heritage Project

"This division of labour will allow an easy realisation of this considerable order of 6200 sq ft of tapestry in the stipulated time, that is to say in five months. It will be a demonstration of normalisation and of distribution of labour by the application of the Moduor", Le Corbusier explained in a letter written to Jawaharlal Nehru in 1954. "This art can actually become a growing concern in the architectural evolution of India giving an impulse to the handicraft in the villages [` 85] Certain chapters of the Indian Five Year Plan might take into consideration this question, from the point of view of its connection with economics, handicraft and art".

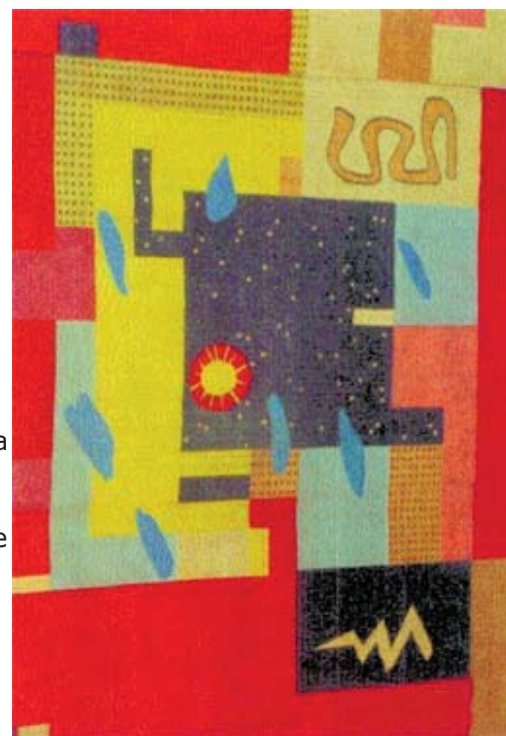
Perhaps the concept was too utopian and radical to bear fruit. In reality, the tapestries were woven as single pieces by The East India Carpet Company, Private Limited of Amritsar (later to become Oriental Carpets of New Delhi), which set up a special organisation to ensure the completion of the immense task in record time for the inauguration of the building in 1955.

Despite the variation in their size, all nine tapestries were based on the same generic design — compositions of a geometrical orthogonal order, "stressing the balance and preciseness appropriate to law matters", with rectangles of flat colours animated by stylised motifs devised by Le Corbusier to symbolise Indian traditions, the culture of Punjab and the philosophy underlying his design for Chandigarh. A total of 53 detailed drawings and coloured sketches were prepared in his Paris atelier for the accurate transmission of the concept. These graphic tools were accompanied by metaphorical descriptions of the themes, the motifs and colours used for each of the tapestries.

In general, the motifs designed by Le Corbusier symbolised intangible values of natural elements, manmade objects and abstract geometric shapes. The presence of "opposing forces" in life and nature is reiterated through the interplay of several ordinary geometric shapes. In a similar strain, the background colours also symbolised human strengths and failings. The tapestry in the court of the Chief Justice, for example, was predominantly red, symbolising action; while its yellow and blue patches indicated light and space. In other cases, white expressed serenity and clarity, green represented meadows and forests, and so on.

Happily, however, the Chandigarh Administration has been fully seized of the value and the vulnerability of these pieces for quite some time now. Positive action has already been initiated by the administration for a scientific restoration and reinstallation of the affected tapestries of the high court as well as the Haryana Vidhan Sabha. Also, the piece lost from the Punjab Vidhan Sabha is being replaced by an authentic reproduction, which is being executed under careful control of officials of the Department of Urban Planning, Engineering Department and the author. Le Corbusier's tapestries are but one example of the plight of several valuable elements of the modern heritage of Chandigarh.

— The writer is Coordinator, Chandigarh Heritage Project



Detail of Tapestry for the Court of the Chief Justice

Description by Le Corbusier – "In the middle, top part, the sky with a starlit night and a sun. The clouds around open on a blue sky. On the left, the meander of the rivers that signifies that its run may sometimes be very long, very agitated, very unreasonable. It is the meander of complications and of complexities."

— Courtesy: Chandigarh Heritage Project

Pictures in wool

An interesting story is told of the revitalisation of the art in 20th century. Sometime in the 1950s, Pablo Picasso asked the French artist Jean Lurçat, the leading revivalist of tapestry in modern art, why he wove his pictures in wool. Lurçat's response, "One fibre of my wool is a 1000 times more precious than a piece of your paper" provoked Picasso to transfer some of his masterpieces to tapestry. He was soon joined by many other well-known modern artists, including Calder, Matisse, Braque, Klee, and Le Corbusier. — KJ

