

Adaptive Reuse of Modernist Buildings – Hope with Heritage: A case of Government Press, Chandigarh

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Abstract

Objective: The paper rediscovers the definition of adaptive reuse for post-modernist heritage, considering a special case of the Government Press, Chandigarh, exploring the various facets of restoration. **Methods/Statistical Analysis:** The methodology involves collection of primary data in the form of interviews from officials of Chandigarh Administration and secondary data pertaining to analysis of adaptive reuse exploring the parameters of socio-cultural structure, the heritage value, the sustainable performance of the built structure and future needs of the society with emphasis on its contextual relevance. **Findings:** Where people world over are trying to “breathe life” into structures whose purposes no longer exist and where technology has surpassed the meaning of their existence, the Government Press definitely makes a stronger case not only the context of Chandigarh, but the evolutions of the Press, the technological advancements which are so aptly signified in “lost purpose” silently urge to be not just an office building for other departments but a much better renewal. As the situation exists, the entire stretch, where the Press is situated is nothing but an official zone, so how does it stand apart now, being one in the list of heritage structures. **Application/Improvements:** The Government Press, a post-modernist icon, which is invigorating to the image of Chandigarh; the building of Ar. Edwin Maxwell Fry, a sole proclamation of future on “the brutalist” in the city that is “Chandigarh” – can be a fine modern example in a developing nation.

Keywords: Adaptive Re-Use, Chandigarh, Government Press, Heritage, Preservation

1. Introduction : Chandigarh - An Experiment Attributed to New Thinking

“...Government Press buildings at Sector 18 and Chandigarh College of Architecture at Sector 12 have been placed under grade I¹.”

“Chandigarh is significant as the first attempt in comprehensive city planning and the first large experiment in modern urbanism, which had placed India on the world map.”

“....A holistic approach towards protection, preservation, and maintenance of heritage buildings, and the unique characteristic of the city should be adopted. The philosophy, plans and approach envisioned by Jawaharlal Nehru with regard to the new city should not be lost sight of, and kept in mind while taking steps for the above purposes².”

This paper highlights the two crucial phrases and what they imply for preservation of heritage of architecture in Chandigarh-“Experiment” in modern urbanism and “...not be lost sight of”. It comes to interpre-

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tation when we talk of structures and their preservation; adoption of a *holistic approach* or *adapting holistically* to the city of which it is a part of. Technological advances evidently have led to the morphogenesis of life around us and the way we perceive it, but the question here is that are we ready to extend those implications to the world of art and architecture in an intangible manner and make the architecture adapt to the new city. This paper explores the nuances of adaption and reuse of this Industrial heritage by discussing examples on from a global scenario and how they are befitting propositions to the Government Press Chandigarh, which has also been selected in the area based development under the Smart City Plan³.

The importance of heritage and its preservation has always been crucial in view of it being passed on as an heirloom to the future, a story of their past but recently we add another star of sustainability to the restorative process. The resources that have gone into building a project carry an immense economic value along with the socio-cultural value carried by the purpose it was erected for. Taking a step further, the “brutalist” architecture in Chandigarh that abounds in assimilation of the local materials and numerous imported building practices, deserves beyond a sterile restoration. Where the route to preservation currently constitutes to frame the requisite conservation bylaws and regulations as well as action plan for the same to “stop” changes; this paper shows few different paths that lie in the greys of change. It’s a path between the “sterile” preservation⁴ and a new life: Adaptive Reuse.

1.1 The Word “Chandigarh”: Open to Give and Open to Receive

The city of Chandigarh was built under the strong historical precedence of it being a post-modernist experiment and since then has preserved its strong context by safeguarding it with bye laws and regulations which have monitored the control of development within the city even after brimming population and urban growth around the precincts of the city. The population of the city has crossed the mark it was designed for long back but still continues to be a charmer for settlement because of the order it has maintained in its urban patterns. It has grown and undergone tremendous change, which probably the Master (Architect Le Corbusier) himself could not have foreseen at the time of the conception. The brutalist architecture which dominated the scene of this city of “sun, sand and verdure” played an important role in

housing the new population most of them who took refuge here after partition of the state of Punjab. It was meant to convey a break from the past, growth of new, opportunity for the future and the power of new administration and the foundation of new rules; but it never saw that stagnate. It was built for the people who gave it life. Revisiting this glorious past, this paper aims to highlight a congruent future for the beautiful structures that still make up the identity of Chandigarh. They are not mere heritage; they are its living past and surely should evolve along with the city, not tag along under the undervalued pretense of heritage. They are Chandigarh; they are the sanctums of the growth of people who live in it. If the socio cultural value of the cliché “*Chandigarhian*” has evolved, then why should not the bold architecture of Chandigarh open them with the “open hand” - “open to give and open to receive”?

1.2 The Government Press Building

The formal documentation on the Government Press, Chandigarh (as shown in Figure. 1⁵) available for this iconic structure by⁵ “Documenting Chandigarh” terms the ensemble of such novel structures under miscellaneous buildings. The lack of Indian prototypes gave the opportunity for different concepts it in total contrast with the rest of the buildings in Chandigarh.



Figure 1. The Government Press, Chandigarh, Front Facade (5).

In addition to being the only piece of *bauhaus* architecture in Chandigarh, it lives on as a legendary work Ar. Edwin Maxwell Fry, a member of Architect Pierre Jeanneret’s team. Meticulously planned, with separate circulation for defined activities and meaningful spaces for each, open courts formed by the wings; it somewhat opened the industry to a city with its front glass façade, opening onto the arterial circulation road (V2), Madhya Marg. An industrial marvel housing big print-

ing machines for government documents a few decades from now, it lies partly in disrepair and partly to be used as a general office building for offices with no accommodation. Since Chandigarh was a city built to engage global view and 6 decades after it being declared the capital city, close to becoming a heritage city, a pertinent question arises on the fate of this structure in particular, arising from the strategies of preservation around the globe.

2. Possible Renewal Strategies

2.1 Case Studies and Analysis

Suggestive of adaptive uses, one thinks of additions that might be proposed, as per se in the Serpentine Gallery by Ar. Zaha Hadid, which hints to stand as a competitive neighbor of the existing glass facade⁶. Now here is where there lies a very strong argument on the retention of the facade and the sanctity of the context. The Government Press, the “only” glass facade building in the “steel and concrete” city of Chandigarh by LC’s team was placed on the main road “Madhya Marg”, probably foreseeing the role of Press and highlighting its revolutionary imagery. An addition to it which encompasses a congruent principle or an opposite one so as not deceive this primary purpose may be hard to find. On the contrary, just retaining the building and restoring it without reviewing its better use would render it defunct somewhat like the case of the Preston Bus Station⁷.

Howsoever, a middle path of saving the structure in addition to provision of ecological benefits for the community might enhance the concept of the city. Primary to the need of facadism, also runs parallel, a need for a sustainable revival of the same; to enhance the thermal comfort inside the building but without sacrificing the original context. Sustainability not only in terms of materials used but also the resources available. We find projects world over, which are half the scale or probably very old as compared to the Press, but still have been revived flagging high the concept of sustainability. A long abandoned structure, a Torpedo Station⁸, only accessible by boat, will be refurbished to be enjoyed by boating enthusiasts. The Polish architects MFRMGR plans to enclose the site with a perimeter of usable docks, as well as add a second level to the existing building. The other exemplary revival is that of Silos in Netherland⁹. Early in 2009, Amsterdam city planning ran a competition for an adaptive reuse project concerning a former sewage treatment plant in the Zee

burg district of the city. The winning design – a multi-functional cultural center, which would house exhibition spaces, a media center, movie theatre and theatre hall, crowned by a rooftop restaurant in one silo and an open rooftop playground in the other. Inspired by Holland’s most popular children’s book author, the late Annie MG Schmidt, Aronsen Gelauff brought the playfulness of the design with the main aim to “breathe new life into the silos, transforming them into an inspiring and lively place, which will help shape the character of the new Zee Burg housing district.”

Where people world over are trying to “breathe life” into structures whose purposes no longer exist and where technology has surpassed the meaning of their existence, the Government Press definitely makes a stronger case. It’s a building which is not even a century old, belonging to a crucial setting and set in an environment whose link to history is indeed unique. Not only the context of Chandigarh, but the evolutions of the Press, the technological advancements which are so aptly signified in “lost purpose” silently urge to be not just an office building for other departments but a much better renewal. As the situation exists, the entire stretch, where the Press is situated is nothing but an official zone, so how does it stand apart now, being one in the list of heritage structures. In fact a subtle renewal, but finer one is witnessed as we go further outwards on the Madhya Marg itself where amidst office zone is a humble memorial of the beginnings of the city; the Le Corbusier’s first office space that has now been converted into a museum. It houses all the original works of the Master and his team done for the City of Chandigarh and carries with it the same background of materials and landscaped elegance that it was primarily a witness to. No additions have been made, just restorations but now it carries an immense value of housing the treasures of the conception of the city.

Purporting a renewal, similar to this one, for the Press which actually traces the history and helps join the threads of the past with that of the future only to make the urban fabric rich; citing the example of the Tate Modern is very apt². A revival from an industrial past to that of an elite function of a museum, housing contemporary art, within the brutality of its architectural form; it speaks volumes of the concept behind revival. Keeping to forefront, urban needs of renewal of South Bank and bearing in mind; historical precedence, the value of the structure, its nature, its proximity to St. Paul’s Cathedral on the other side of the bank; the project has

undoubtedly highlighted the possibility of phenomenal adaption to its reuse. The gallery opened to much acclaim in 2000 and has attracted more than 30 million visitors since. It's success is partly due to its situation on the banks of the Thames, but also because of the use of space within the building. The main Turbine Hall, a huge space of 3,400 square meters that once housed the main electricity generators, was fortunately left in its original form, providing a vast gallery for art installations that often require public interaction and appreciation of the space. It is this space and its ability to be so successfully transformed time and time again that has changed people's perceptions of art, which is no doubt so much more than the architects were hoping for in their redesign. In a similar fashion, the design for the redevelopment of 837 Washington Street, located within the Historic District and approved by the Landmarks Preservation Commission, incorporates both influences of history and modern change that have been driven in large part by the redevelopment of the High Line on the western edge of the neighborhood. While the building predicts the evolution of the neighborhood – the interplay of the historic industrial language and a dramatic contemporary translation – it also refers to other parts of New York City's past, such as the elevated trains, bridges, and gritty structure of the High Line itself¹⁰. The design of 837 Washington reaches deep into the trove of historic influences in the architecture of New York City while simultaneously showing a way forward for new architecture within historic neighborhoods.

3. Comparatives of Development

Some might point out that these cases are where cities have already left a mark with their development for generations to come and countries like India or China which are developing economies are still striving to showcase their best. Then why would these economies or their cities find pride in showcasing what has been done just few years back? Why would not they want to exhibit their growing technical expertise, knowledge of new materials and modern thoughts by making something new? China's two-pronged approach to sweeping architectural renaissance and urban landscaping sees avant-garde buildings such as the iconic Bird's Nest, the bubble-wrapped National Aquatics Center, the gravity-defying CCTV headquarters, and the beehive-like Sino Steel International Plaza spring up in cities like Shanghai,

Beijing and Tianjin. The other approach involves revitalizing brutalist buildings and making the part of life, than just an icon.

But very cautiously should we decide the functions otherwise it may lead to a despicable loss of resources and heritage value like in the case of the slaughterhouse in Shanghai, 1933 Shanghai, was designed amidst the vibrant urban landscape of pre-communist Shanghai by British architects¹¹. Built in concrete it originally intended for use as a slaughterhouse, but served a number of purposes over the years from medicine factory, cold storage facility, to its current incarnation as a 'commercial hub for creative industries'. Falling into disrepair, the building was actually brought to ruins by the commercial ventures which never took off.

3.1 Close Connect in History



Figure 2. The Van Nelle Fabriek, Rotterdam (12).



Figure 3. Science Dinner at the New Factory (13).

The Van Nelle Fabriek, Rotterdam, (as shown in Figure 2¹²) a much older but a strong equivalent of Government Press, an iconic 1920's industrial architecture, first in the Industrial made curtain glass presents forth a revelation in the field of adaptive reuse(as shown in Figure 3¹³). A privately owned industrial structure, on the Heritage

count of Netherlands, was transformed after it grew out of its said purpose of tea, coffee and tobacco factory in 1995. A structure that proclaimed freedom by its openness and uniqueness in the way it understood human psychology was rendered inoperable for the “new” generation. From the symbol of the modernist and functionalist culture to being *brought to life* again, this structure rejuvenated all its glory, by adapting to the changing scenario. The conditions of integrity in terms of composition (location and organization of territory, functional relationships, panoramic views, etc.) and in architectural sense are still met.

Described as ‘the most beautiful spectacle of the modern age’ and ‘a poem in steel and glass’¹⁴ once, the factory today houses 80 businesses, stages international events, from Art Rotterdam to exclusive dance parties. An urban renewal from a reinterpretation of socio-cultural values is what invigorated it.

4. Role of Governance in Renewal

Presumably, urban renewal, sprouting only from the tangible and intangible facets, would not be valid without the control of measures of governance. Such is the case of Chandigarh, primarily a bureaucratic center, a government building cannot be leased out or rented for commercial needs, which in a way cuts the profit bearing angle of the project. In its own manner the control of the government over this building eliminates a major threat of commercialization and partially takes care of the sanctity of heritage. According to Mr. M. P. Singh, I.A.S, the current Principal Secretary to the Governor, (November 2015) who seems very clear on the same thought, does realize a need for exploring it for a better purpose for the Government but surely not as a Press. Highlighting the change in the arena of printing and the way it is administered now, he renders the previous functions of the building void; but seems nostalgic about the big printing machines that once were the center of the mechanized system of printing government forms and letters. “A reminiscence of the past ...” he says. Taking the talk to an urban level he talks of the open areas and allied facilities and highlights the need of public participation in any venture. Stating the example of Late Sh. Beant Singh’s Memorial he attributes that certain decisions can be taken for the

society only by the imposition of the future societal needs.

Speaking highly of Ar. M. N. Sharma (November 2014) who worked at a very young age on the Government Press project with Pierre Jeanneret’s team, Mr. Krishna Mohan I.A.S and former Home Secy. Chandigarh (April 2016) states that the Bahaas building can be put to a better use than just an accommodation for the offices that can’t find rental space in the heart of the administrative hub. Highlighting the independence of decisions in corporate sector, he says such decision making powers are amiss in the government scenario. Achieving consensus is not just a matter of communication abilities and cultural awareness¹⁵ but also standard procedures in planning and development.

Ar. Kapil Setia, the current Chief Architect, Department of Urban Planning, (December 2014). Chandigarh, talks about the rich heritage that the building carries because of its prime location and its character. Vividly describing each aspect and the additions made at the highest level of administration, he remembers the strict rules that govern the façade and land use of the building. He even hints at a better use than probably just another option of an office building for some departments without a space to function. A further conversation on various other buildings of that time, and he proudly proclaims their heritage status and how they are being preserved and restored for better future; primary being the Museum and Art Gallery, Sector 10 which has to be booked for a repair because of its busy schedule of reservations by the artists country-wide.

5. Conclusion

Reminiscent of the approach the city was built with “to breathe life” one should aim to enhance the existing fabric of such buildings like the Press, while at the same time, making purposeful contemporary interventions. The approach as a “new discovery” stands to rebel our thoughts against some inflexible strategies which have disturbed the balance by producing eye sores in the name of preservation or ruins under the garb of reuse; we may think of coming to a proposal for the Press which is invigorating to the image of the Government Press; the building of Ar. Maxwell Fry, a sole proclamation of future on “the brutalist” in the city that is “Chandigarh” – a fine modern example in a developing nation.

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